TAKING SABBATARIANISM SERIOUSLY: THE POSTAL SYSTEM, THE SABBATH, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

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Between 1810 and 1830, thousands of Americans joined in a moral crusade to protest the complicity of the federal government in a practice they deemed offensive to God. According to Lyman Beecher, one of the most influential evangelical preachers of his day, the issue was "perhaps the most important that ever was, or ever will be submitted for national consideration."[1] The protest was unprecedented. Never before had the federal government interfered so directly with the rhythms of everyday life. Never before had so many Americans formally challenged the authority of their elected

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[1] Lyman Beecher, "Pre-eminent Importance of the Christian Sabbath," *National Preacher*, 3 (Mar. 1829), 156.

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representatives to legislate on matters touching on deeply held religious beliefs.

For those unfamiliar with the political culture of the early republic, the object of this protest might come as something of a surprise. The protesters were Sabbatarians, and their goal was to prevent the federal government from desecrating the Sabbath by requiring that the mails be transported and the post offices open to the public seven days a week.[2]

Given the character and scale of the protest, one might suppose that historians would long ago have chronicled its origins and analyzed its import. After all, since the 1960s the "ethnocultural school" of political historians has documented the pivotal role of religious belief in shaping the "cultural pattern" of American politics, while practitioners of the "new" social history have highlighted the persistence of localistic resistance to central authority as a recurring theme in the American past.

Yet to a startling degree, the controversy over Sabbath mails has yet to find its historian. The first phase of the protest (1809-1817) has been almost entirely ignored, while its second phase (1826-1830) has been considered almost exclusively from the standpoint of its most outspoken detractors. In the *Age of Jackson* (1945), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., blithely dismissed the protest in a sentence, declaring that "few people . . . took the question very seriously." Almost a half century later, remarkably little has changed.[3]

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[2] Throughout this essay, I have generally refrained from referring to the biblical Sabbath as Sunday. In doing so, I have tried to be faithful to nineteenth-century usage. For Sabbatarians and anti-Sabbatarians alike, the Sabbath had a rich symbolic meaning that it has subsequently lost. Phrases like "Sunday mails" fail to convey this meaning, and have been avoided. The term "Sabbatarian" itself deserves a brief word of explanation. During the first half of the nineteenth century, this term was often used to describe seventh-day Baptists and others who, like the Jews, observed the Sabbath on the seventh-day (i.e., Saturday). In keeping with what has become the twentieth-century historical convention, I shall use the term to describe everyone who opposed the desecration of the first day (i.e., Sunday).

[3] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston 1945), 143. On the first phase of the protest, see Fred J. Hood, *Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837* (University, Ala. 1980), 97-101, and Oliver W. Holmes, "Sunday Travel and Sunday Mails: A Question Which Troubled Our Forefathers," *New York History*, 20 (Oct. 1939), 413-415. On the second phase, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism: Sabbatarian Politics and the Rise of the Second Party System," *Journal of American History*, 58 (Sept. 1971), 316-341; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York 1978), 83-88; James R. Rohrer, "Sunday Mails and the Church-State Theme

Much of this neglect can be explained by the widespread tendency of historians to disparage the grievance. As one prominent historian recently quipped, Sabbath mails were, after all, "hardly a matter to shake the foundations of the republic."[4] Given the premises of late twentieth-century historiography, such a perspective is hardly surprising. Like temperance and anti-Masonry, Sabbatarianism has all too easily fallen victim to what E.P. Thompson once called the "enormous condescension of posterity."[5] Compounding this tendency has been the paucity of scholarship on the two institutions around which the protest revolved. Few historians have devoted much attention either to the postal system or to the Sabbath; as a consequence, even the most basic facts about the protest remain obscure.

This essay seeks to restore Sabbatarianism to its rightful place in the history of American political culture. Though the controversy over the Sabbath mails was part of a much broader effort to prohibit Sabbath work, travel, and recreation, in the twenty-year period between 1809 and 1830 the two were so closely entwined as to be nearly synonymous. To understand why so many Americans objected to the Sabbath mails, one must take their protest seriously as a reform movement, paying close attention to its origins, to the protesters' grievance, and to the political, economic, and cultural setting within which it occurred. Hundreds of Sabbatarian petitions in the National Archives indicate a significance of this issue for nineteenth-century contemporaries that has thus far been but dimly perceived.

Taking Sabbatarianism seriously will also help to clarify its relationship to the emergence of the so-called second party system, which, historians now agree, marked the advent of modern mass politics in the United States.[6] In a pioneering essay, Bertram Wyatt-

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in Jacksonian America," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 7 (Spring 1987), 53-74; and Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1850* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), 168-172. The most extensive historical survey of Sabbath observance in the pre-Civil War period remains Frederick L. Bronner, "The Observance of the Sabbath in the United States, 1800-1865," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University 1937).

[4] Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism," 328.

[5] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1963), 12.

[6] For a summary of the recent literature on this topic, see Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York 1986), 89-140, 157-162. For a somewhat different perspective on the second party system, see Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York 1990).

Brown contended that the protest represented the response of a status-anxious clergy to the decline in their moral authority occasioned by the rise of the professional politician and the ward boss. Though differing sharply with Wyatt-Brown's assessment of the protesters' motives, this essay shares his conviction that the relationship between the protest and the advent of modern mass politics is worth pondering. It is a striking fact that the second phase of the protest coincided with the election of Andrew Jackson, an event that paved the way for the creation, during the 1830s, of a stable pattern of two-party competition that, with remarkably few exceptions, has remained the norm right up to the present.[7] This circumstance was hardly fortuitous, and the final section of this essay considers some further ways in which these two developments may have been linked.

Sabbatarianism, like so many antebellum reform movements, grew directly out of the remarkable outburst of popular religiosity that has come to be known as the Second Great Awakening. Though usually presumed to have been confined primarily to New England, in fact it drew support from evangelicals throughout much of the United States. Lyman Beecher may have figured prominently in both protests, yet he was by no means its principal inspiration. Indeed, if any one person is to be credited with having set the ball rolling, the honor should probably go to Hugh Wylie, the Scotch-Irish postmaster of the bustling market town of Washington, Pennsylvania, and an elder in his local Presbyterian church.[8]

In 1809, Postmaster Wylie found himself in a curious predicament. As a member of his church, he was bound to refrain from all unnecessary labor on the Sabbath; as a public officer he was under special orders from Postmaster General Gideon Granger to sort any mails that might arrive at his office on this day. Rather than resign, Wylie chose to comply with Granger's directive. His decision was hardly surprising: Washington may have been little more than a village, yet its post office was a critical transshipment point for mails

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[7] Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism," 321, 329, 340. The most detailed study of national party formation in the 1830s remains Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill 1966).

[8] For a parallel analysis of the origins of Antimasonry, see Ronald P. Formisano and Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827," *American Quarterly*, 29 (Summer 1977), 139-165.

bound to the West, netting Wylie some $1,000 a year, a princely sum in an age when an ordinary laborer might make $1 a day.[9]

Had Wylie confined himself to sorting the mails, his conduct would probably have attracted little notice. Yet Wylie chose to take the further, and far more disruptive, step of opening the post office to the public so that churchgoers living out of town could pick up their letters and attend church on the same trip. If Washington's local historian can be believed, before long the church hour became a regular hour of distribution, at which, presumably, Wylie's son David, the deputy postmaster, ran the post office while his father officiated at the church.[10]

Wylie's conduct provoked a heated controversy. Could it be squared with his "profession" as a Presbyterian? To settle the issue, local church leaders sought the advice of the Ohio Presbytery, which, in turn, deferred to the Pittsburgh synod, the penultimate tribunal in the Presbyterians' elaborate juridical hierarchy. In October 1809, after "maturely considering" Wylie's case, the synod rendered its verdict, ruling that, under "existing circumstances," Wylie should be excluded from the "special privileges of the church," meaning, presumably, that until he resigned his postmastership he would be barred from communion. Unsatisfied, Wylie appealed his case all the way to the Presbyterian general assembly, which at its 1810 annual meeting upheld the Pittsburgh synod, in effect expelling Wylie from the church.[11]

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[9] *A Register of Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States, on the Thirtieth Day of September, 1816* . . . (Washington, D.C. 1816), 65. In 1816, the closest year for which figures are available, Wylie's office was the third most lucrative in the state.

[10] Boyd Crumrine, ed., *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania* . . . (Philadelphia 1882), 487. In opening his post office to the public, Wylie was apparently acting on his own authority, rather than on any special orders from Granger. Presbyterian church officials, however, saw matters rather differently, insisting that Granger had "required" Wylie to open his office on the Sabbath. *Records of the Synod of Pittsburgh, from its First Organization, September 29, 1802, to October 1832* . . . (Pittsburgh 1852), 62.

[11] *Records of the Synod of Pittsburgh* . . . , 62; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* . . . *from A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820* (Philadelphia [1847]), 456, 508, 514; Crumrine, ed., *Washington County*, 487; Hood, *Reformed America*, 99. In censuring Wylie, the general assembly insisted that it was "not conscious" of "any disrespect to the civil authority": "They wish to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, but must at every hazard, render unto God the things which are God's."

Though Wylie's predicament presumably troubled few non-Presbyterians, it did serve to highlight the considerable discretion postmasters exercised in setting their office hours. At the time of Wylie's censure, Congress had never passed legislation requiring postmasters to keep their offices open at specific intervals, preferring instead to leave this matter up to the postmaster general. In 1810, possibly in response to Wylie's predicament, all this would change. Eager to eliminate the possibility that certain favored customers might receive their letters in advance of the general public—and, perhaps, no less anxious to provide postmasters like Wylie with a clear mandate for opening their office on the Sabbath—Congress passed legislation in April that, among other things, required all postmasters to open their office to the public on every day the mail arrived, and to deliver "on demand" any item being held in their office on every day of the week.[12]

The passage of the 1810 law raised a number of vexing questions. Did it require that *every* postmaster in the republic open *every* office on the Sabbath? And if so, need it be opened all day? Or did it require merely the opening of those offices at which the mails actually arrived? Clearly troubled by the possible effect of the law on the republic's 2,300 postmasters, Granger chose to interpret it in the narrowest possible way. The new law, Granger ruled, applied only to those offices where the mails actually arrived. Postmasters at these offices were to be required merely to open to the public for no more than one hour immediately after the mails had been sorted, provided that this hour did not interfere with the "hours of public worship." Should the two coincide, then the office was to be opened "after the usual time of dissolving the meetings for that purpose."[13] Though Granger never seems to have prepared a list of precisely which offices were affected by the new law, in 1810 they presumably would have included all those offices on the east-west line between Washington and the Missouri territory; the north-south line between Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Savannah, Georgia; and the south-west lines between Washington and New Orleans.[14]

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[12] *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 2nd sess., 638, 642; Richard Peters, ed., *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America . . . , 1789-1873* (17 vols., Boston 1850-1873), II, 595 (ch. 37, sec. 9 [1810]).

[13] Gideon Granger to House of Representatives, Jan. 30, 1811, in *American State Papers: Post Office Department* (Washington 1834), 45; Return J. Meigs, Jr., to House of Representatives, Jan. 16, 1815, *ibid.*, 46.

[14] Meigs to House of Representatives, Jan. 16, 1815, *ibid.*, 46.

The clerical response to the new law was swift, and by no means confined to western Pennsylvania. Within months of its passage, a broad-based coalition of ministers and church leaders in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston petitioned Congress to urge its repeal. The Philadelphia petition was headed by James P. Wilson, the esteemed minister of Philadelphia's First Presbyterian Church, and included the signatures of an impressive array of church officers representing German Reformed Congregationalists, Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Baptists. In Boston, supporters included William Ellery Channing, a leading spokesman for the nonevangelical Unitarians and perhaps the most thoughtful and clear-headed religious liberal in the United States.[15]

The Philadelphia, New York, and Boston petitions were the work of clerical moderates intent on redressing the shortcomings of a specific piece of legislation. Far more radical, and uncompromising, was the response of the Pittsburgh synod. In October 1810, the synod urged Congress not merely to repeal the new law but to suspend all regulations obliging postmasters, postal clerks, stagedrivers, and postriders to labor on the Sabbath. Because these regulations infringed on the "laws of God," the synod insisted, they violated the "rules of conscience" and thus ought to be repealed, presumably through the passage of legislation prohibiting the transportation or opening of the mails on the Sabbath.[16]

The Pittsburgh petition transformed the terms of debate. To repeal the new law might inconvenience some customers, but it would have no discernible impact on the critical task of scheduling and coordinating the mail routes to eliminate unnecessary layovers and delays. To suspend the transportation of the mails on the Sabbath

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[15] *Ibid.*, 44-45; petition of James P. Wilson and others [1810], Petitions Received, House Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, RG 233 (National Archives and Records Service, Washington); petition of members of the association of ministers in and about Boston to the Senate and House of Representatives regarding the Sabbath mails, Dec. 26, 1811, William Ellery Channing Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston). For Beecher's response, see Charles Roy Keller, *The Second Great Awakening in Connecticut* (New Haven 1942), 152.

[16] The Pittsburgh petition was prepared by three Presbyterian ministers: Matthew Brown and James Hughes of the Ohio presbytery and William Speer of the Redstone presbytery. *Records of the Synod of Pittsburgh . . .* , 70, 73-74. The history of the Pittsburgh synod is undeservedly obscure. For relevant details, see E.H. Gillett, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (2 vols., Philadelphia 1864), I, 502-507; 540-541.

would be far more disruptive. On some routes the mails had been transported seven days a week ever since the ratification of the federal Constitution, if not before.[17] Though the practice lacked a specific legislative mandate, it had long been presumed to serve the public good.[18] The Pittsburgh petition challenged this consensus, bringing a central premise of American postal policy under attack.

Once the issue was cast in these terms, the battle lines hardened. In 1812, emboldened by the Pittsburgh synod, the Presbyterian general assembly petitioned Congress to stop the transportation as well as the opening of the mails on the Sabbath. Once again, Postmaster Wylie's predicament helped to focus the debate. In May 1812, having received an appeal from several of Wylie's fellow townsmen to reopen his case, the general assembly turned its attention to the difficult issues it raised. Clearly wary of expanding the scope of the debate, it refused to overturn its earlier ruling, agreeing merely to appoint a committee to consider the propriety of petitioning Congress to repeal the 1810 law. Significantly, no mention was made of the far thornier questions raised by the transportation of the mails.

Three days later, the committee made its report. Though it had been instructed merely to consider the repeal of the 1810 law, it now felt it had no choice but to take the more radical stand. As the "rulers in the Church," the committee explained, it considered itself "constrained" to discipline any church member found guilty of transporting or delivering the mail on the Sabbath. Swayed by the committee's logic, the general assembly set aside its misgivings and

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[17] Meigs to House of Representatives, Jan. 16, 1815, *American State Papers: Post Office*, 46.

[18] At the state level, however, the practice could incur the ire of public officers intent on enforcing state Sabbatarian laws. In December 1808, James Knox, a stagedriver employed by mail contractor Josiah Paine, was indicted by the Essex County Court of Common Pleas for running a stagecoach through the town of Newburyport, Massachusetts, on the Sabbath. Paine appealed his verdict to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, which overturned the lower court on the grounds that the transportation of the mails on the Sabbath was a work of necessity, and therefore a legitimate exception from state law. In his ruling, Massachusetts Chief Justice Theophilus Parsons was careful to define this exemption quite narrowly. The court, he insisted, had granted permission neither to passengers to travel with the mails on the Sabbath, nor to stagedrivers to discharge or receive passengers on this day. Above all, it had not excused the stagedriver "blowing his horn, to the disturbance of serious people, either at public worship or in their own houses." *Commonwealth* v. *James Knox*, 6 Massachusetts 78 (1809).

petitioned Congress in its collective capacity to suspend the transportation as well as the opening of the mails on every seventh day.[19]

Having decided to force a showdown with Congress, the general assembly set out to mobilize support among its member churches. Beginning in June 1814, it distributed 2,000 blank petitions to every Presbyterian church in the United States, appointed 39 ministers as agents to coordinate the effort, and solemnly enjoined every Presbyterian minister in the United States to drum up support among his congregation.[20] By the end of the month, it had even persuaded the general associations of Congregationalist ministers in Connecticut and Massachusetts to coordinate petition efforts of their own. It was at this point, and not before, that Lyman Beecher threw himself into the cause, delivering an eloquent speech before the Connecticut general association and enlisting the cooperation of the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Good Morals, which he had helped found in 1812.[21]

This joint Presbyterian-Congregationalist effort produced a flurry of petitions. By the end of 1815, some one hundred had found their way to Congress from Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, Ohio, Kentucky, and every New England state except Rhode Island. Though most identified their signers merely as the "inhabitants" of a certain town or county or as "members of the several Christian denominations," there seems little reason to doubt that they were primarily the work of individual Presbyterian or Congregationalist congregations acting in conjunction with their local minister. Several took pains to stress that they represented the considered judgment of a church or town meeting acting in its corporate capacity, and not merely the aggregate opinion of whoever happened to sign. In Monson, Massachusetts, Congregationalist minister Alfred Ely, troubled by what he evidently regarded as a subterfuge, crossed out

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[19] *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church*, 508, 514.

[20] *Ibid.*, 566-567.

[21] *Proceedings of the General Association of Connecticut, June 1814* (Hartford 1814), 12-13; *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Association of Congregational Ministers in Massachusetts Proper* (Boston 1814), 3; Keller, *Second Great Awakening*, 145-153. For a valuable discussion of the society that stresses its antipolitical character and its role in fostering the emergence of a social order sharply divided between party politics and public morality, see Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia 1978), 33-35.

the word "inhabitants" and substituted in its place "members of the Congregational church."[22]

Like most reform movements, Sabbatarianism may well have drawn at least part of its inspiration from circumstances having little to do with the ostensible cause of concern. The censure of Hugh Wylie, for example, probably owed a good deal to the notorious sectarian rivalries that raged in the Pennsylvania backcountry among Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Though the cultural and religious history of this region has attracted surprisingly little attention from social historians, in many ways it was no less notable than that of the celebrated "burned-over-district" of upstate New York. By 1809 the Pittsburgh synod had acquired a national reputation for doctrinal orthodoxy and missionary zeal. It is thus probably not coincidental that, during the same meeting the synod censured Wylie, it found itself embroiled in an unusually bitter controversy with dissident Presbyterian preacher Thomas Campbell over the merits of infant baptism. This controversy would soon split the church and hasten the establishment, by Campbell and his son Alexander, of the Disciples of Christ, one of the fastest-growing sects of the nineteenth century. Though fervently evangelical, the Campbells were fiercely anti-Sabbatarian, suggesting that, in censuring Wylie, the synod may well have been attempting to define the permissable bounds of dissent.[23]

In New England, the protest was but one aspect of a much more general campaign for moral reform. Even after the passage of the 1810 law, ministers routinely inveighed against Sabbath profanation without drawing any special attention to the transportation and opening of the mails.[24] For some, the federal government became a convenient scapegoat for far more disturbing evils occurring closer to home.[25] Others may have been spurred by disgust at the Madison

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[22] Holmes, "Sunday Travel and Sunday Mails," 416-417; David Daggett to the Senate, Jan. 27, 1815, *American State Papers: Post Office*, 47; printed petition of members of the Congregational church, Monson, Mass., Jan. 11, 1815, Petitions Received, RG 233; petition of a legal meeting of the inhabitants of the town of Hinsdale, Massachusetts, Jan. 4, 1811, *ibid.*

[23] Gillett, *History of the Presbyterian Church*, I, 502-507; 540-541; Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* . . . (2 vols., Cincinnati 1897), I, 222-246. See also Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven 1989), 68-81.

[24] See, for example, "Outrages on the Sabbath," *Panoplist and Missionary Magazine*, 10 (Apr. 1814), 159-162; "On the Sabbath," *ibid.* (May 1814), 198-203; *Report of the [Massachusetts] Legislature on the Observance of the Sabbath* (Boston 1814).

[25] William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.* . . . (4 vols., Salem 1905-1914), IV, 311.

administration's foreign policy. Most New Englanders staunchly opposed American participation in the War of 1812. Who knows how many petitioners' signatures represented a covert referendum on a foreign policy they derided as ill-conceived, inept, and immoral?

Sectarian squabbling, political opportunism, and antiwar sentiment by no means exhaust the possible sources of popular discontent. Indeed, perhaps the most characteristic feature of the Sabbatarians' rhetoric was its distinctly anticommercial cast. Why, asked the *Panoplist*, organ of the Massachusetts Congregational church, did the federal government require that the post offices be open to the public on the Sabbath and the mails be kept "constantly in motion"? To pose the question was to answer it: "It is to accommodate the merchants, and other men of business, who have agents and correspondents in different parts of the country."[26]

While instances of the Sabbatarians' anticommercial animus could easily be multiplied, it would be a mistake to exaggerate their import. Strict Sabbath observance was, after all, perfectly compatible with the vigorous pursuit of private gain the rest of the week. Indeed, to the extent that it soothed the conscience of guilt-ridden merchants, it may even have helped to give market transactions, including the sale of one's own labor, an aura of legitimacy. At the very least, it reinforced the emerging notion that time was money and that even God had his price. The Sabbath, as the *Panoplist* observed in a revealing turn of phrase, was God's "peculiar property." Presumably, the rest of the week belonged to whoever could foot the bill.[27]

However large such cultural, political, or economic considerations may have loomed in the minds of petitioners, none go very far toward explaining why this particular issue proved so compelling. How was it that a grievance that, on the face of it, seems so petty and trifling could have enlisted the support not only of Beecher but also of Channing? Could there conceivably have been plausible, if not legitimate, grounds for complaint?

Answers to these questions are rather more complicated than most historians have supposed. To a far greater extent than has typically been admitted, the transportation and especially the opening of the post offices on the Sabbath *did* violate what one might term the

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[26] "On Carrying the Mail upon the Sabbath," *Panoplist and Missionary Magazine*, 10 (Oct. 1814), 438.

[27] *Ibid.*, 436.

moral geography of the Sabbath. It is difficult today to imagine just how much commotion could be caused in the early republic by the opening of the post office to the public on the Sabbath, or by the passage of a mail coach through a country village. In virtually every state, and in many localities, a welter of laws restricted the kinds of activities that could legally be pursued on this day. Rather than being an anachronistic vestige of a dimly remembered past, these laws were widely respected and routinely, if sometimes sporadically, enforced. In Connecticut, there are even hints that after 1800 their enforcement was becoming more, rather than less, rigorous. The only vehicles permitted to travel on this day, reported Scottish traveler John Duncan in 1818, were the stagecoaches carrying the public mails; no one else could escape the "Argus eye of the civil officers." Specific prosecutions might be criticized as capricious or arbitrary, yet the basic principle—that the Sabbath was a day set apart, which state and local authorities had the right to enforce through appropriate legislation—met with almost universal assent.[28]

Given this situation, it was no wonder that the 1810 law caused such a stir. With its passage, the post office became the *only* public institution exempt from the ban. In hundreds of communities this made it the only local institution impervious to local control. The consequence was predictable: on the Sabbath the local post office quickly became a favorite gathering place for anyone venturing out-of-doors. In many cities and towns it was mobbed. In Boston, according to the *Panoplist*, "hundreds" went there immediately after church. This was hardly surprising, the editorialist added ruefully, since the demand for up-to-date commercial and political information was "astonishingly great." Even the passage of a mail coach through a country village could occasion alarm. In New Hampshire the clergy complained that it "unavoidably diverted" public attention from the

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[28] John M. Duncan, *Travels through Part of the United States and Canada in 1818 and 1819* (2 vols., New York 1823), I, 119; Richard D. Birdsall, "The Second Great Awakening and the New England Social Order," *Church History*, 39 (Sept. 1970), 352-361. For a somewhat different interpretation of state enforcement of Sabbatarian legislation in this period, see William E. Nelson, *Americanization of the Common Law: The Impact of Legal Change on Massachusetts Society, 1760-1830* (Cambridge, Mass. 1975), 109-116; and Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 29-35. See also Daniel R. Ernst, "Church-State Issues and the Law, 1607-1870," in *Church and State in America: A Bibliographical Guide: The Colonial and Early National Periods*, ed. John F. Wilson (Westport, Conn. 1986), 331-336. For a related discussion of the "geography of vice," see Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana 1987), 75.

"sacred design and employments of that holy Day." What was still worse, once the mails arrived, the citizenry would flock to the post office "in multitudes" to collect their letters and newspapers and to hear the latest news. In this way, newspapers came to supplant the pulpit, the "Oracles of Divine Truth."[29] Rather than being set apart as a day sacred to God—an interval to be devoted not to ordinary business, and certainly not to leisure, but to contemplation and prayer—the Sabbath was fast becoming no different from the rest of the week. A day dedicated to the holy contemplation of the Word of God had been invaded by the contentious, ephemeral world of print. The federal government was attempting to impose on the local community, through its postal laws, the very habits that the pious were so strenuously trying to guard it against.

From the standpoint of political theory, the implications of this policy were profound. Heirs to the Reformed Protestant tradition of sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin, Presbyterians and Congregationalists considered themselves duty-bound to uphold their covenant with God. This covenant was understood to extend not only to the private conduct of church members, but to the public administration of the state. Before 1809, the federal government had seemed so far removed from the day-to-day activities of ordinary Americans that most assumed it lacked the power to regulate personal behavior. It was, in short, not a true state invested, like the British Crown, or the legislatures of the individual states, with the authority to oversee the moral and spiritual well-being of everyone living within its domain. With the passage of the postal law of 1810, this assumption came under close scrutiny for perhaps the first time in the history of the republic.[30]

For the Presbyterian general assembly, the import of the new legislation was clear. Now that Congress had taken upon itself the regulation of personal behavior, it too had an obligation to abide by "those principles of truth and equity revealed in the Scriptures."

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[29] "On Carrying the Mail," 436-437; printed petition signed by the inhabitants of Hollis, New Hampshire, opposing Sabbath mails [1815], Petitions Received, Senate Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, Records of the U.S. Senate, RG 46 (National Archives).

[30] For a related discussion of popular conceptions of the proper relationship of church and state, see Stephen Botein, "Religious Dimensions of the Early American State," in Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II, eds., *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* (Chapel Hill 1987), esp. 321-322.

Thus it saw nothing improper in rebuking Congress for its neglect of the Fourth Commandment. Freely citing the Bible in support of its position, it berated Congress for its cruelty not only toward postmasters and mail contractors but also toward the thousands of horses forced to labor seven days a week. Ought not, it thundered, the righteous man be merciful to his beast? The very form of the petition reinforced its message. Modeled after a biblical jeremiad, it warned Congress that, should it fail to repent, it risked drawing down upon "our nation" the "divine displeasure."[31]

From a late twentieth-century perspective, these anxieties may seem excessive. Like most reformers, the clergy was willing to exaggerate to make its point. Yet it was not merely engaged in the politics of nostalgia. Rather, it had a far more specific agenda in mind. Above all, it sought to protect a cherished cultural and religious heritage from outside assault.

Nowhere was this more evident than in New England. In his *Travels in New England and New York* (1821-1822), Timothy Dwight, a Congregationalist minister and president of Yale College, praised the Sabbath as an "all important institution" fundamental to the preservation of the distinctive heritage of New England. Sensitive foreigners agreed. In the 1830s, Austrian-born journalist Francis Grund visited New England and joined in the celebration of the Sabbath. Having done so, he described it as an anthropologist might a tribal rite. On Saturday evening, all amusements were closed at sundown, including the theatres, as families assembled to prepare for the day of rest. The next morning, rich and poor alike, setting aside all "aristocratic" pretensions, joined together to "sanctify the Lord." The poor especially took comfort from the temporary release from their daily toil, making the Sabbath the most "*democratic* feature" in the whole Christian religion. The experience, Grund reflected, was not merely "peculiarly impressive" but "cheering"; in fact, he could not remember ever having spent, in Europe, a day "half so satisfactorily." Its influence, he concluded, was far-reaching. Even after a New Englander had left his native home, Grund remarked, he could "easily conceive" how he might persist in associating the Sabbath with the "happiest dreams of his childhood."[32]

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[31] *Minutes of the Presbyterian General Assembly*, June 2, 1812, 513-514.

[32] Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, ed. Barbara Miller Solomon (4 vols., Cambridge, Mass. 1969), IV, 255-256; Francis J. Grund, *The Americans, in their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (Boston 1837), 47, 50.

Had Grund been able to draw on the language of interpretative anthropology, he might well have concluded, with David D. Hall, that the Sabbath is best understood as a ritual process in which sacred time becomes a "liminal moment," a time for entering momentarily the freedom of the kingdom of God.[33] It was this flourishing cultural and religious institution—and not the boring, gloomy ordeal that most twentieth-century historians have assumed it to be—that the clergy sought to protect from outside assault. The Sabbath provided an opportunity for collective self-renewal, for the encouragement of those ties of family and kin so vital to the emerging cult of domesticity, and for the ritual reaffirmation of the transcendent reality of sacred time.[34] Federal postal policy—by opening, however narrowly, the floodgates of commerce—threatened this heritage. Throughout the republic, ordinary Americans quite literally feared for their souls.

The 1810 law seriously constrained Postmaster General Granger's administrative autonomy. Not surprisingly, as early as January 1811, he broadly hinted that he would support its repeal. As a native of Suffield, Connecticut, and a graduate of Yale, the very citadel of Congregationalist orthodoxy, Granger understood the New Englanders' solicitude for the Sabbath and recognized how bitterly its desecration would be resented. Though he conceded that, in times of "extreme anxiety or national calamity," it might well be necessary for certain postmasters to open their offices on the Sabbath, he questioned the wisdom of imposing a single standard upon a country as diverse as the United States, and hoped that in any event Congress

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[33] David D. Hall, "Religion and Society," in *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Baltimore 1984), 337.

[34] The history of the nineteenth-century, or Victorian, Sabbath remains largely unwritten. Of the many works that touch on the topic, I have found especially helpful Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840* (New York 1988), 251-256; 275-281; 300-303; Larkin, "Remembering the Sabbath," *Rural Visitor*, 20, no. 4 (Winter 1980-1981), 4-6; Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (2d ed., New York 1984), 42-45, 73-77, 125-127; William A. Clebsch, *From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History* (New York 1968), 157-162; and Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca 1967), 50-55. On the colonial Sabbath, see Winton U. Solberg, *Redeem the Time: The Puritan Sabbath in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass. 1977). On Great Britain, see John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday* (Manchester, Eng. 1980).

might leave this decision up to him. As matters stood, the law posed a "hardship" for postmasters and, what was worse, tended to bring into "disuse and disrespect" the "institutions of that holy day."[35]

Massachusetts Congressman Elijah Hunt Mills took an equally dim view of the law. A Federalist from the Congregationalist stronghold of Northampton, Massachusetts, a prominent foe of the War of 1812, and a keen student of constitutional law, Mills praised the petitioners' determination to promote the "religious observance of the Christian Sabbath," and seconded their call for the repeal of the law. Though Mills's position was often cited by Sabbatarians in later years in support of their cause, it seems to have been primarily a pious gesture; while a bill to this effect was drafted in 1816, it never seems to have been debated, much less brought to a vote.[36]

The repeal of the 1810 law was not, of course, the Sabbatarians' only goal. Far more radical was their insistence that the federal government suspend the transportation of the mails every seventh day. Here they met with an almost unanimous rebuff. Granger did his best to sound conciliatory, but even he viewed this prospect with undisguised alarm. To minimize the possibility that stagecoach drivers working on the Sabbath might distract the pious from their "devotions," Granger instructed them to pass quietly, without announcing their arrival or departure by the "sounding of horns or trumpets." Yet on the basic issue Granger stood firm. Taking care to buttress his position with a biblical citation, he defended the continuous transportation of the mails as a "work of necessity" that helped public officers to remain abreast of "such events as might be interesting to the nation" and merchants to "equalize" the transmission of market information from city to city.[37]

For Congressman John Rhea of Tennessee, chairman of the House Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, military

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[35] Granger to House of Representatives, Jan. 30, 1811, *American State Papers: Post Office*, 45.

[36] Elijah Hunt Mills to House of Representatives, Mar. 1, 1817, *ibid.*, 358; *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 302; Harmon Kingsbury, *The Sabbath: A Brief History of Laws, Petitions, Remonstrances, and Reports . . .* (New York 1840), 31-33. On Mills, see David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution in American Conservatism: The Federalist Party Leadership in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York 1965), 270-271.

[37] Granger to House of Representatives, Jan. 30, 1811, *American State Papers: Post Office*, 44. Of the presumably small number of congressman who publicly supported the proposed suspension in the transportation of the mails, the most prominent was probably Silas Wright of New York. *Annals of Congress*, 17th Cong., 1st sess., 1190.

considerations loomed uppermost. The son of a Presbyterian preacher, Rhea shared the petitioners' concern about the recent expansion of federal power and agreed that, under ordinary circumstances, it might well be "desirable" to grant their request. Given the imminent prospect of a second war with Great Britain, however, such a step would be inexpedient. In January 1815, five months after British troops had captured and burned Washington, D.C., Rhea reiterated his position. Especially during wartime, he insisted, the uninterrupted transportation of the mails was of "great national importance."[38] The Presbyterian general assembly might brood darkly about the wrath of God, but Rhea was in no mood for a sermon.

Even staunch opponents of the war effort doubted the wisdom of stopping the mails. On January 27, 1815, just one week after Rhea's report, Senator David Daggett of Connecticut struggled to reconcile the petitioners' request with the military imperatives of a nation at war. A staunch Congregationalist and a highly respected New Haven lawyer, Daggett was in an especially good position to reach a judicious verdict on the petitioners' request. Like Granger, he understood that the federal government had been the aggressor. Were the federal government now to commence carrying the mails on the Sabbath for the first time, he hypothesized, Congress would have no choice but to put the issue to a vote. Nonetheless, Daggett refrained from urging even the repeal of the 1810 law, insisting that, given the precarious international situation, the fastest possible communications through the "whole extent" of the republic was "absolutely necessary." Daggett conceded that, should Granger fail to protect the postal system from any "improper practices" that might arise from its desecration of the Sabbath, he might find himself impelled to change his mind, yet he remained convinced that, given the circumstances, any change of policy would put the republic at risk.[39]

Even in peacetime, national security remained a concern. In 1817, long after the specter of war had receded, Postmaster General Return J. Meigs, Jr., warned that any suspension of mail delivery would disorder the "whole system of transportation" on more than

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[38] John Rhea, chairman of the House Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, to House of Representatives, Jan. 3, 1812, Jan. 20, 1815, *American State Papers: Post Office*, 45, 46.

[39] Daggett to Senate, Jan. 27, 1815, *ibid.*, 47.

seven hundred routes, adding worriedly that it would enable even foreign agents to "outspeed" the federal government. The enormous size of the republic made this objective all the more imperative. The greater the territorial extent of any government, Meigs observed, the greater must be the "necessity" for fast and frequent mail delivery.[40]

By far the most notable aspect of Meigs's analysis was its unprecedented sensitivity to the likely effect of any proposed suspension on postal finance. If the transportation of the mails were suspended on the Sabbath, Meigs reasoned, the cost of its transportation would almost certainly increase. On the principal routes, most mail contractors operated stagecoaches that carried passengers as well as the mail. Were these stagecoaches required to rest on the Sabbath, many of their passengers would seek out alternative means of transportation. Before long, contractors would insist that their mail contracts be renegotiated. To make matters worse, the revenue available to pay the mail contractors would be reduced, since passengers traveling on the Sabbath would "inevitably" get in the habit of carrying letters out of the mails, thus defrauding the government of the postage. To illustrate his point, Meigs reminded Congress just how easily stagecoach passengers had become accustomed, during the War of 1812, to carrying letters out of the mails when, as a wartime expedient, postage had been temporarily increased fifty percent.[41]

Though Meigs's grasp of postal finance was impressive, no congressman chose to follow his lead. For Congressman Mills, it was little short of blasphemous to introduce "considerations of economy" into the public discussion of such a momentous issue. Rejecting all appeals to national security and postal finance, Mills rested his argument on explicitly moral grounds. Were the mails suspended, Mills reasoned, east coast merchants would establish private expresses of their own, causing far more commotion than the present policy. Only if every state banned all transportation on the Sabbath—an extremely unlikely event, to be sure—would Congress be justified in extending this ban to the mails. Until this day, Mills concluded, it was his "sincere belief" that seven-day mail delivery was not only "sound and enlightened policy" but "consistent" with "the requirements of the *moral law*." [42]

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[40] Meigs to House of Representatives, Feb. 20, 1817, *ibid.*, 358.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] Mills to House of Representatives, Mar. 1, 1817, *ibid.*, 359. In his recent

Mills's report brought the first phase of the Sabbatarian protest to a close. After seven years of agitation, the mail coaches still ran on the Sabbath and the post offices remained open. For the next nine years, the issue lay dormant. Not even an isolated petition seems to have found its way to Congress. All this would change when, in 1826, a new combination of circumstances brought the issue once again into the spotlight, sparking a second petition effort and, for the first time, a concerted opposition.[43]

The origins of the second phase of the protest owed less to a specific episode like the censure of Hugh Wylie than to the widespread conviction among Presbyterian and Congregationalist church leaders that recent improvements in the means of transportation—such as the completion of the Cumberland Road (1819), and the Erie Canal (1825)—rendered it advisable to join together to slow the commercial penetration of the Sabbath. In May 1826, the Presbyterian general assembly proclaimed that the situation had become far too grave merely to remind their congregations to refrain from travel on this day. Rather, it took the far more extreme position of urging an outright boycott of every transportation company that persisted in running a single stagecoach, steamboat, or canal packet seven days a week.[44]

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article on Sabbatarianism, James R. Rohrer apparently overlooks this 1817 report, asserting that, prior to 1829, Congress had based its opposition to the petitioners' grievance on "economic grounds alone." "Sunday Mails and the Church-State Theme," 63.

[43] E. C. Tracy, *Memoir of the Life of Jeremiah Evarts, Esq.* (Boston 1845), 317; [Jeremiah Evarts, ed.], *An Account of Memorials, Presented to Congress, Praying that the Mails may not be Transported, nor Post-Offices Kept Open, on the Sabbath* (Boston 1829), 4. Unlike its predecessor, the second petition effort owed little to any change in postal law or regulations. This is worth stressing, since several historians have attributed the decision to renew the petition effort to the postal law of 1825. In fact, the new law left the previous law unchanged. *Post Office Law, Instructions and Forms . . .* (Washington 1825), 7; John McLean to Samuel McKean, Jan. 19, 1829, in *House Reports*, 20th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 65, 7; Samuel Marron to the Postmaster General, Dec. 9, 1850 (U.S. Postal Service Library, Washington). The earliest example of this confusion of which I am aware can be found in Emerson Davis, *The Half Century, or, a History of Changes that Have Taken Place . . . in the United States, between 1800 and 1850* (Boston 1851), 185.

[44] *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church*, May 30, 1826, 183; *Proceedings of the General Association of Connecticut* (Hartford 1826), 6-7. Critics charged that the Sabbatarians turned to this new strategy because they had found it impossible to enforce the Sabbath at the local level. Richardson, *Alexander Campbell*, I, 535.

To be successful, such a boycott would require an unprecedented degree of lay support. Among those who answered the call was the Presbyterian elder Josiah Bissell, Jr., an energetic and highly successful Rochester, New York, merchant who had long been prominent in the cause of evangelical moral reform.

Bissell's interest in organized Sabbatarianism began in late 1826, when he joined a group of fellow townsmen in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Congress to close the post offices on the Sabbath. Frustrated by Congress's refusal to act and infuriated by the moral hypocrisy of the rich men of Rochester who claimed to be good Christians even as they routinely profaned the Sabbath, in the following year he established a Sabbath-keeping stagecoach and canal packet company—the "Pioneer Line"—on the lucrative Albany-Buffalo route. The scale of the venture was impressive: Bissell and his fellow promoters invested some $60,000 in horses, stagecoaches, and canal packets, an enormous sum for the day. Outside of the textile industry, few enterprises could boast a larger capitalization. When it opened for business, the Pioneer Line may well have been the best-equipped transportation company in the United States. Though Bissell's coaches and packets would rest on the Sabbath, he intended to make up for lost time the rest of the week. If all went according to plan, Bissell felt sure that even the most time-conscious of New Yorkers would come to conclude that a scrupulous regard for the Fourth Commandment was neither anachronistic nor visionary but thoroughly up-to-date and perfectly compatible with the temporal as well as the spiritual interests of the enterprising man-on-the-make.[45]

Among those who watched Bissell's activities with concern was Colonel John M. Sherwood, proprietor of the "Old Line Mail." Having long reaped large profits from a virtual monopoly of the Albany-Buffalo passenger trade, Sherwood was quite naturally troubled by the imminent prospect of a trade war. Hoping to reach a compromise with his upstart competitor, Sherwood offered to sell Bissell his stock and retire from the field. Bissell seriously considered his offer, but the deal fell through at the last moment when he learned that, under federal law, he would be obliged to take over Sherwood's mail contract, which required him to run on the Sabbath. Bissell

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[45] Petition of citizens of Rochester, Jan. 15, 1827, Petitions Received, RG 233; Richard F. Palmer, *The "Old Line Mail": Stagecoach Days in Upstate New York* (Lakemont 1977), 112-128; Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass. 1977), 60-61.

lobbied Postmaster General John McLean to change the contract, but McLean demurred, claiming that he lacked clear proof that public opinion demanded the change.[46]

For three years, Bissell and Sherwood found themselves engaged in the very head-on competition that Sherwood had done his best to avoid. While most historians, echoing Bissell's critics, have treated the Pioneer Line with a mixture of wry amusement and bemused contempt, English traveler John Fowler was far more impressed. In common, no doubt, with a good portion of the long-suffering traveling public, Fowler resented the Old Line Mail's monopoly over the Albany-Buffalo route and credited Bissell with forcing Sherwood to cut fares and improve service. Bissell never did supplant Sherwood, yet at its peak the Pioneer Line did secure perhaps thirty percent of the market, an impressive achievement given the open hostility of much of the newspaper press, which freely ridiculed Bissell's mingling of piety and profits.[47]

Having demonstrated the commercial feasibility of a Sabbath-keeping transportation company, Bissell next had to persuade the traveling public to change its ways. Rather than relying on the prestige of individual clergymen, Bissell—in conjunction with a group of like-minded merchants and evangelical ministers in New York City—decided to establish a new organization specifically to promote the better observance of the Sabbath. Every May, hundreds of ministers from around the country gathered in New York City for "Anniversary Week," a quasi-religious convention that brought together the agents of the American Tract Society, the American Bible Society, and the American Sunday School Union. In New York for the 1828 anniversary week, Bissell found it relatively easy to assemble an imposing array of ministers and other evangelicals to lend their names to the cause. Accordingly, on May 6, 1828, Bissell's brainchild—the General Union for the Promotion of the Christian Sabbath (GUPCS)—held its first meeting. On hand were Bissell, a handful of laymen, and three hundred ministers, including Lyman Beecher.[48]

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[46] McLean to Bissell, Nov. 26, 1828, Postmaster General's Letterbooks, Records of the Post Office Department, RG 28 (National Archives).

[47] Palmer, *"Old Line Mail,"* 124-127. Bissell's market share has been estimated by comparing the toll fees paid by the two lines. In 1829, the Pioneer Line paid $957.47; the Old Line Mail $2,314.37.

[48] "Minutes of the Convention," in [Lyman Beecher], *The Address of the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath, to the People of the United States,*

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the GUPCS was its unabashedly democratic—and, indeed, almost populistic—approach to reform. Rather than working through existing institutions like the Presbyterian general assembly, the GUPCS vowed to take its case directly to the American people. To become a member, one had merely to pledge to honor the Sabbath and, in particular, to boycott all transportation companies that operated stagecoaches, steamboats, or canal packets seven days a week.[49]

The organization clearly owed at least part of its inspiration to the recent efforts of the Presbyterian general assembly to promote the better observance of the Sabbath. Even more influential was the example of voluntary associations like the American Temperance Society (ATS), which Beecher had helped found in 1826. Unlike the patrician-led temperance societies of the 1810s that, like the Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance, had focused primarily on the social control of the unruly poor, the ATS redefined the liquor problem to focus on the temperate drinker rather than the hopeless drunk. To bring the message home, Beecher enjoined ordinary Americans to pledge that they would abstain totally from all forms of hard liquor.[50]

Beecher's success with the temperance pledge convinced Bissell, quite possibly at Beecher's prodding, to apply the same technique to the cause of the Sabbath. Like the ATS, the GUPCS sought to use this technique to redefine a long-accepted custom as the very epitome of evil. It was, in short, an exercise in what today might be called consciousness-raising.[51]

Accompanied by Minutes of the Proceedings in its Formation . . . (New York 1828), 3-5; Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill 1960), 146-154. For the attribution of the *Address* to Beecher, see *Third Annual Report of the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath* (New York 1831), 23.

[49] [Beecher], *Address of the General Union*, 7-8.

[50] Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport 1979), 54-74. The continuities between temperance and Sabbatarianism are worth stressing. Though Paul Johnson has termed the former voluntaristic and the latter coercive, this distinction will not stand up under close scrutiny. Both sought to change public opinion through a variety of means, including consumer boycotts. That some contemporaries found the latter more coercive says less about the Sabbatarians' strategy than it does about the nature of the evil they sought to redress. Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 75.

[51] Matthias Bruen, "Address," in *First Annual Report of the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath* (New York 1829), 10; [Beecher], *Address*, 11-12.

The goals of the GUPCS reflected this new strategy. Rather than attempting, like the Sabbatarian reformers of the 1810s, to secure the better enforcement of state and local Sabbatarian laws, the GUPCS would seek instead to "form" an "efficient public sentiment." To this end, Beecher prepared a public address aimed at the widest possible variety of groups. To the "laboring poor," he asked rhetorically: "Will you sell your birth-right?" To the merchant community, he invoked the rights of property, stressing their "right" to boycott companies that refused to keep the Sabbath. Highly sensitive to the charge that the boycott might be seen as coercive, Beecher flatly rejected the charge that it infringed upon anyone's rights. "This is a land of slavery," Beecher reminded his readers, where a citizen may not "regulate" his own property by "his own discretion."[52]

To spread the word, GUPCS organizers mounted an impressive publicity campaign. According to one estimate, 100,000 copies of Beecher's address were circulated in pamphlet or newspaper form, an enormous total in an age when few newspapers boasted a circulation larger than 1,000. GUPCS branches, or "auxiliaries," were established in twenty-six cities and towns, while, following a visit from Beecher, the Presbyterian general assembly endorsed the cause, urged local congregations to form GUPCS auxiliaries, and enjoined church leaders to enforce the "discipline of the church" in "every case" of Sabbath desecration.[53]

Like many contemporaries, most historians have assumed that the GUPCS was established primarily to stop the Sabbath mails. While understandable, such a conclusion is misleading. By 1828, Beecher had come to regard the Sabbath mails less as an end in itself than as a means for transforming public attitudes toward the Sabbath. Indeed, in his address he made no reference to either the possibility that the GUPCS might renew the petition effort or, even

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[52] [Beecher], *Address of the General Union*, 12-15.

[53] Bruen, "Address," 8; Lewis Tappan, "Report of the Executive Committee," *Second Annual Report of the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath* (New York 1830), 5; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church*, May 27, 1828, 242. On newspaper circulation, see Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 260 Years, 1690-1950* (New York 1950), 202-203. Mott adds that, in 1833, the New York *Courier and Enquirer* claimed a circulation of 4,500, making it "undoubtedly the largest paper in the country."

more surprisingly—given his active support of the previous petition effort—to the evils wrought by the Sabbath mails.[54]

Beecher's evasiveness was deliberate. As GUPCS corresponding secretary Matthias Bruen explained, the society had been established not to lobby the government but to inspire a "radical reform" in the "great body of our fellow citizens." The organization did help to coordinate the petition effort that began the following December, yet it pointedly refrained from petitioning Congress in its corporate capacity. Since the American public, and not the government, held the "keys to power," once they chose to "reform themselves," success would be guaranteed.[55]

Beecher's support for the petition effort was, thus, perfectly compatible with his thoroughly progressive, highly individualistic approach to moral reform. For Beecher, signing a Sabbatarian petition became, like taking a temperance pledge, less of an expression of the collective will of an elite institution than the exercise of the independent judgment of a community of like-minded men. The previous petition effort may have failed to produce any specific legislation in Congress, but it had had a remarkably good effect in the hinterland, spurring ordinary citizens to a far more conscientious observance of the Sabbath than had prevailed before the protest began. Profoundly impressed by this fact, as well as by the dramatic increase in religious enthusiasm that had followed the official disestablishment of the Connecticut Congregational church in 1818, Beecher had by 1828 come to recognize that public behavior could be far more effectively molded by appealing directly to the conscience of individuals, rather than relying, as the Connecticut clergy had tended to do prior to 1818, on the mere force of law.

In keeping with this new strategy, Sabbatarian organizers worked hard to insure that support for the protest would be interdenominational and nonsectarian. Eager to deflect the charge that, like its predecessor, the protest was little more than a Presbyterian-Congregationalist joint venture, they purposely concealed Beecher's authorship of the GUPCS address and actively encouraged laymen to draft petitions of their own. Hundreds received

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[54] As late as mid-August, a GUPCS spokesman could deliver an entire address without mentioning the Sabbath mails. Samuel Bayard, *An Address Delivered on Thursday, the 14th August, 1828, in the Presbyterian Church, at Princeton, N.J., at the Request of a Committee of the Society Auxiliary to the General Union for the Due Observance of the Lord's Day* (Princeton 1828).

[55] Bruen, "Address," 13.

in the mail blank petitions addressed "To the Postmaster at [blank]." That such a strategy could be undertaken in a republic as far-flung as the United States was, of course, a tribute not merely to the Sabbatarians' organizational sophistication but to the revolution in long-distance communications that they were among the first to exploit.[56]

Among the most energetic of these organizers was Jeremiah Evarts, a Boston-based evangelical lawyer best known today for his eloquent opposition to Indian removal. Eager to secure the support of Americans not likely to find persuasive what orthodox Calvinists presumed to be the Word of God, Evarts consciously downplayed fine points of theology in favor of more general considerations of morality and law. For example, in a petition he prepared for distribution throughout New England, he purposely deleted as "too strictly religious" a passage describing the theological ramifications of the federal government's sin against God.[57]

The language of the petitions reflected this new strategy. While biblical appeals were by no means ignored, petitioners increasingly framed their appeals in terms derived from republican theory and constitutional law. Contending that public morality was a necessary precondition for the perpetuation of republican institutions, and that Protestant Christianity was a necessary bulwark of morality, petition after petition defended the proper observance of the Sabbath to be of fundamental importance to the future of the republic. Petitioners from Perry, Ohio, for example, insisted that Sabbath mail delivery had a "direct tendency" to destroy that "piety and morality, so necessary to be cherished by a REPUBLICAN PEOPLE." Others ridiculed those who continued to insist that, even in peacetime, considerations of national security required that seven-day mail delivery be maintained. To defend the policy now that the republic was at peace merely because it had once proved "essential" in wartime was, petitioners from Sullivan County, Tennessee, contended, no less "antirepublican" than to insist that the federal government ought to maintain a standing army in peacetime merely

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[56] "Mails on the Sabbath," *Boston Recorder and Religious Telegraph*, Dec. 18, 25, 1828; Jeremiah Evarts to Rufus Anderson, Dec. 26, 1828, Jeremiah Evarts Letterbooks, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions [ABCFM] Records (Manuscript Department, Houghton Library, Harvard University); printed petition, attached to a handwritten remonstrance from Oren S. Avery, postmaster, and others of Perryville, New York, Dec. 23, 1828, Petitions Received, RG 233.

[57] Jeremiah Evarts to Rufus Anderson, Dec. 26, 1828, ABCFM Records.

because a standing army might prove necessary in time of war.[58]

Nowhere was the Sabbatarians' preoccupation with law and morality more evident than in their reconceptualization of the predicament of the pious postmaster. Rather than confining themselves to berating the federal government for its violation of the strictures of the church, they now stressed that the 1810 law proscribed from office precisely those individuals most worthy of the public trust. Given the enormous sums of money that passed daily through the postal system, and the constant temptations to which postmasters were exposed, they warned darkly of the dangers of theft. In no department of government, observed a group of Baltimore merchants, was it more necessary that public officers should possess the "highest degree of moral feeling, and the strictest integrity." The present regulations, warned petitioners from Norfolk, Connecticut, had a "direct tendency" to consign the "very responsible charge" of the mails to men who paid no regard to moral obligation.[59]

The 1810 law, the Sabbatarians now contended, violated not only the Fourth Commandment, but the postmasters' constitutionally guaranteed right to the free exercise of religion. It was, insisted the Sullivan County petitioners, an "*American test act*," an American counterpart to laws that, in Great Britain, restricted public office to members of the Church of England.[60] Slowly yet inexorably, driven by the need to appeal to an ever-wider audience of potential supporters, the Sabbatarians found themselves projecting the moral authority of the Ten Commandments onto the Bill of Rights.

In the absence of public opinion polls, it is, of course, impossible to determine with any precision just how many Americans found the Sabbatarians' argument compelling. There can be little question, however, that the new strategy had significantly widened their popular base of support. By May 1829, a mere five months after the call had gone out, 467 petitions had found their way to the House and

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[58] [Evarts], ed., *Memorials*, 15; petition of citizens of Sullivan County, Tennessee, Mar. 2, 1830, Petitions Received, RG 233. Postal special agent James Holbrook reached an opposite conclusion: "Republican principles require that the less should yield to the greater—individual convenience to public good. And an excellent illustration of the practical application of these principles by the wisdom of Congress, is found in the provisions which that body has made to secure the uninterrupted transmission of the mails." James Holbrook, *Ten Years among the Mail Bags: or, Notes from the Diary of a Special Agent of the Post-Office Department* (Philadelphia 1855), 213.

[59] [Evarts], *Memorials*, 19, 21.

[60] Petition of citizens of Sullivan County, 1828, Petitions Received, RG 233.

Senate, more than had reached Congress in the entire seven-year span of the previous protest. By May 1831, the total had increased to over 900, more than twice as many as before.

Though the bulk of these petitions were, like their predecessors, mass-produced by Sabbatarian organizers, a surprising number were intensely personal, guilt-ridden appeals for relief. Altogether, over 90 separate texts found their way to Congress, many clearly the product of local initiative. While most contained from between 20 to 50 signatures, suggesting that they may well have been primarily the work of an isolated church or denomination, a few obviously represented the voice of a far larger, more heterogeneous constituency. One Boston petition, for example, contained 2,000 signatures, while another from New York contained 7,000.[61] Even the most strident anti-Sabbatarian could hardly claim these petitions to have been the product of a tiny theocratic cabal.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of the petition effort was its ability to mobilize large numbers of Americans in widely scattered parts of the country. Though fully 75 percent of the petitions came from the Mid-Atlantic and New England, the strongholds of Presbyterian and Congregationalist orthodoxy, no fewer than 11 percent came from the South Atlantic, with 9 percent from the Northwest and 5 percent from the Southwest. Evarts was far from impartial, yet he was not far off the mark when he boasted that Sabbatarians could be found from Vermont to Alabama and from Maine to the banks of the Mississippi.[62]

Support for the protest could be found in all the principal Protestant denominations. Though few petitions identified their signers as members of a particular church, scattered evidence suggests that the protest received solid backing not just from Presbyterians and Congregationalists but also from large numbers of Dutch Reformed,

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[61] [Evarts], *Memorials*, 4-7, 31; "The Mails," *Niles' Weekly Register*, Jan. 10, 1829, 313.

[62] For the period between December 1828 and May 1829, the sectional totals were New England (180); Mid-Atlantic (167); Northwest (41); South Atlantic (49) Southwest (30). For the period between December 1829 and March 1831, they were New England (136); Mid-Atlantic (204); Northwest (74); South Atlantic (27); Southwest (24); unspecified (3). The 1828-1829 totals are derived from [Evarts], *Memorials*, 5-7, 31. The 1829-1830 totals are based on my own count of the petitions in the records of the House and Senate committees on the post office and post roads at the National Archives. For the 1810 to 1817 period, the national total was 409.

Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians.[63] Just as GUPCS organizers had hoped, their new strategy had successfully united professing Christians from across the denominational spectrum. To cite but one example, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, the Sabbatarians' supporters included not merely Philip Milledoler, the prominent Dutch Reformed theologian and Rutgers College president—who, given the Calvinistic heritage of the Dutch Reformed, one might expect to side with the Presbyterians and Congregationists—but also George G. Cookman, the local Methodist minister; G.S. Webb, the local Baptist minister; and John Croes, the Episcopal bishop of New Jersey. Even Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing put aside his oft-voiced misgivings about evangelical aggrandizement to once again lend his name to the cause.[64]

Equally notable was the support of many of the republic's most enterprising merchants. Eager to counter the widespread suspicion that merchants would automatically oppose any change that interrupted the flow of market information, GUPCS organizers made a special effort to solicit their support. Merchants like Bissell, of course, hardly needed to be convinced. Many others, however, remained unpersuaded. To help bring them around, Evarts published a four-part editorial in the New York *Journal of Commerce* in which he systematically rebutted every commercial argument he could think of point-by-point. Thanks no doubt in part to Evarts's prodding, the Sabbatarians managed to secure an impressive base of merchant support, including, in Boston, the shipping magnate Thomas Handasyd Perkins, textile manufacturers Amos and Abbott Lawrence, and banker Peter Charndon Brooks; and, in New York, the silk merchant Arthur Tappan and the investment banker James Brown.[65]

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[63] This conclusion has long been the conventional wisdom among religious historians. According to Robert T. Handy, Sabbatarianism united Protestants whose background had been in the state churches with those opposed to all religious establishments. Even the Baptists, notes William G. McLoughlin, overwhelmingly supported the petition effort, despite their commitment to the strict separation of church and state. Radical itinerants like John Leland might find the protest objectionable, yet the rank-and-file "threw themselves headlong into the campaign." Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (2nd ed., New York 1984), 45; William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1883: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass. 1971), II, 1112, 1267.

[64] [Evarts], *Memorials*, 15, 30.

[65] *Ibid.*, 24-30; [Jeremiah Evarts], *The Logic and Law of Col. Johnson's Report to the Senate* (Utica, N.Y. 1829); *Journal of Commerce* (New York), Feb, 19, Mar. 2, 10, 24,

The willingness of such an impressive array of merchants to support a cause that, Evarts notwithstanding, seems so directly at odds with their commercial self-interest, is a bit puzzling. Yet when it is recognized that many, though hardly all, of these merchants lived along the east coast, their support becomes somewhat more comprehensible. Located as they were on the Atlantic seaboard, they were accustomed to obtaining information on the state of the European markets directly from incoming ships. Stopping the mails on the Sabbath would, if anything, only increase their advantage over merchants living on the far-flung commercial periphery that stretched from Rochester to New Orleans. Geography cannot, of course, explain why so many prominent east coast merchants supported the Sabbatarians. Yet it does highlight the fact that, unlike merchants on the commercial periphery, they lacked a compelling reason to join the opposition.

Though Bissell, Beecher, and Evarts clearly regarded the proposed change in postal policy as part of a broader effort to transform public attitudes toward the Sabbath, it would be a serious mistake to overlook the specific grievance that they sought to redress. Not only did all the evils complained of by their predecessors remain, but in the years since 1810 they had been enormously exacerbated by the rapid and continuing expansion of the postal system into the hinterland.

The effect of the expansion of the postal system on the protest was twofold. Most obviously, it made it easier for Sabbatarian organizers to distribute the newspapers, periodicals, and pamphlets that

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1829. The attribution is based on the copy at the American Antiquarian Society. Paul Johnson has interpreted merchant support for the petition effort as proof of the protesters' ulterior motives. A far more plausible explanation is that Sabbatarian organizers like Evarts actively courted merchant support in order to convince a skeptical public of the commercial feasibility of the proposed reform. In Augusta, Maine, for example, one Sabbatarian petitioner observed that while it would have been "easy" to obtain many more signatures of individuals "friendly" to stopping the mails, he had not done so because, having obtained the signatures of a "large proportion of our men of business, merchants, lawyers, &c.," it was thought of "less importance" to secure the signatures of those less likely to be directly affected by its suspension. Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 83-88; letter attached to printed memorial of inhabitants of Augusta, Maine, Jan 21, 1829, Petitions Received, RG 233. For a more extended critique of these "social control" intrepretations, see Lawrence Frederick Kohl, "The Concept of Social Control and the History of Jacksonian America," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 5 (Spring 1985), 21-34.

explained why the issue was so important and, in turn, for their supporters to send off their petitions to Washington. Even more significantly, it made the complicity of the federal government in the desecration of the Sabbath far more palpable. Between 1810 and 1828, the number of post offices had more than tripled (2,300 to 7,651), as had the total mileage of post roads (36,406 to 114,536). Since 1826 alone, the latter had increased by 20 percent, an increase of some 20,000 miles. Postmaster General John McLean had inadvertently aggravated the problem by eliminating layovers that had previously kept the mails idle on the Sabbath. On dozens of routes the mails were now being transported seven days a week where no such service had existed in 1810. "We deeply regret," remarked a group of Sabbatarians from Sackett's Harbor, New York, that the postal system had entered into contracts for the "future transportation" of the mails between Utica and Sackett's Harbor on the Sabbath. "Hitherto," they added, the mails had been carried on this route "but six times a week."[66]

Postmasters had special cause for concern. In hundreds of communities they were now, for the first time, obliged to open their offices on the Sabbath. Many found this burden onerous. According to Postmaster General McLean, local postmasters had been "constantly" directing his attention to this "great grievance" ever since he took office. Connecticut senator Calvin Willey confessed to Evarts that his opposition to the 1810 law was due largely to his personal resentment at being obliged to profane the Sabbath during his eleven years service as postmaster of Tolland, Connecticut.[67] For young men like Matthew M. Campbell, a clerk in the Lexington, Kentucky, office and an ardent Presbyterian, the policy posed a genuine moral dilemma. Should he resign his clerkship, jeopardizing his future career, or should he work on the Sabbath and risk the wrath of his church?[68]

Postal officers were by no means the only class of Americans to be adversely affected. Though few contemporaries raised the issue directly, the opening of the post office on the Sabbath had an equally significant, albeit quite different, effect on American women, and especially on those wives and mothers who were attempting to forge a

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[66] Pliny Miles, "History of the Post Office," *Bankers' Magazine*, 7 (Nov. 1857), 363; [Evarts], *Memorials*, 22.

[67] Jeremiah Evarts to David Greene, Feb. 15, 25, 1829, ABCFM Records.

[68] James M. Campbell to Matthew M. Campbell, July 16, 1829, Campbell Papers (Filson Club Historical Society, Louisville, Ky.).

collective identity as members of the rapidly emerging middle class. While ostensibly open to all, the post office had by the 1820s come to acquire a reputation, rather like the Masonic lodge or the city saloon, as an all-male retreat, a convenient escape from their domestic obligations. On no day was this more true than the Sabbath. On weekdays, the appearance of a fashionable woman in a big-city office might occasion surprise and perhaps a derisive smirk. On the Sabbath, in hundreds of cities and towns, it would have been out of the question.[69]

Some women doubtless resented this informal ban as discriminatory. Others, intent upon defending the "woman's sphere" of family and church, considered it an invasion upon home and hearth. From their perspective, the federal government, through its postal policy, had given their husbands a tailor-made excuse for avoiding their domestic obligations on the one day of the week when they could not plausibly claim to be at work. In antebellum Mississippi, recalled southern planter William Alexander Percy, the men of the community considered it their sacred obligation to repair immediately to the post office as soon as they heard the sound of the steamboat whistle signaling the arrival of the week's mail. Should they happen to be attending church with their families, they would rise as a body and, oblivious to the choir's giggles and their wives' indignant glares, calmly and deliberately exit down the main aisle. Reassembled at the post office, they would quickly sort through any incoming letters and read the latest news before settling down for a lazy afternoon of drinking, poker, and male camaraderie.[70]

Precisely how central women were to the petition effort remains somewhat uncertain. Because women were understood to occupy a decidedly marginal place in the political order, it is perhaps hardly surprising that, of the hundreds of Sabbatarian petitions sent to Congress, every single one was headed by a man. What is rather more curious is that no woman seems to have even added her name to the list. Though anti-Sabbatarian publicists like Anne Royall and James Akin were quick to stress the role played by women behind the scenes, distributing pamphlets and circulating petitions for men to

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[69] Holbrook, *Ten Years among the Mail Bags*, 326; Edward R. Foreman, "Post Offices and Postmasters of Rochester," in *Centennial History of Rochester*, ed. Edward R. Foreman (4 vols., Rochester 1933), III, 61. For a suggestive comparison, see Dorothy Ann Lipson, *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut* (Princeton 1977), 329-340.

[70] William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee Recollections of a Planter's Son* (1941; rep., Baton Rouge 1984), 5-6.

sign, prevailing gender stereotypes seem to have precluded them from participating more directly.[71] This is all the more puzzling when it is remembered that temperance activists like Justin Edwards had for several years been actively courting female support, while female participation in the petition process was by no means unknown. Sabbatarianism, thus, seems to have served, rather like antimasonry, not merely as a logical link between the church-based female activism of the 1820s and the emergence, after 1835, of an organized woman's movement but as a pointed reminder of the powerful constraints that blocked the open participation of women in the public sphere.[72]

In December 1828, the same month the Sabbatarians began to petition Congress, an anti-Sabbatarian committee was organized at Tammany Hall in New York. Under the leadership of Quaker merchant and shipowner Preserved Fish, counterpetitions were prepared and circulated. By May 1829, some 30 of these petitions had found their way to Congress. While most identified their signers merely as the "inhabitants" or "citizens" of a city or town, a few political and religious organizations did petition Congress directly in their corporate capacity. By 1830, these included the Indiana general assembly, the Alabama state legislature, and the Alabama Baptist Association.[73]

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[71] Carroll Smith Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement, 1812-1870* (Ithaca 1971), 70-96; Anne Royall, *The Black Book or, A Continuation of Travels, in the United States* (3 vols., Washington 1828-1829), I, 171-177.

[72] Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 67. For a parallel argument about women and antimasonry, see Lipson, *Freemasonry*, 330-331, 336-337; and Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York 1988), 80-102. For a survey of recent scholarship on women and American politics, see Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review*, 84 (June 1984), 620-635.

[73] *An Address to the Committee Appointed by a General Meeting of the Citizens of the City of New York, Held at Tammany Hall, January 31, 1829 to Express their Sentiments on the Proposition of the Sunday Union . . .* (New York 1829); Preserved Fish, "Preamble and Resolutions Adopted at a Meeting of the Citizens of New York, Against the Passage of any Law Prohibiting the Transportation and Opening of the Mail on the Sabbath," Feb. 9, 1829, 20th Cong., 2nd sess., *Senate Document 64*; "Resolution of the Legislature of Alabama, in Opposition to any Measure for Stopping the Mail on Sunday," Jan. 22, 1831, 21st Cong., 2nd sess., *Senate Document 36*; "Memorial of the General Assembly of the State of Indiana," Feb. 15, 1830, *American State Papers: Post Office*, 240; petition of the Alabama Baptist Association, Oct. 10, 1831, Petitions

Though anti-Sabbatarians could be found throughout the United States, they seem to have been especially vocal in commercial centers like New Orleans and Rochester that were geographically distant from the eastern seaboard. Both cities were at the extreme periphery of an international commodities market that linked American cotton planters and wheat farmers with European consumers. Should the transportation of the mails be interrupted once a week, these merchants might have to wait, in the case of New Orleans, as many as three additional days to receive up-to-date information on sudden fluctuations in European demand.[74]

Nowhere was this concern greater than in Rochester, New York, hometown of Josiah Bissell and the Pioneer Line. To solicit the opinion of upstate businessmen regarding the proposed suspension of seven-day mail delivery, Postmaster General John McLean temporarily suspended the reletting of the mail contracts on the Albany-Buffalo route in the fall of 1828. In response, Rochester merchant William B. Rochester warned that any change in the status quo would occasion "immense loss and inconvenience." Mindful of Bissell's ability to mobilize popular support, Rochester feared especially that Congress might permit an individual state or even a locality to act on its own authority, to give the GUPCS pledge, as it were, the force of law. Were such legislation enacted, all those merchants unlucky enough to live in the affected region would be "constantly" at least one day behind in the receipt of commercial information. Given the importance of seaboard market information to the merchants of Rochester, such a delay would cause "incalculable injury."[75]

Such arguments met with a receptive audience throughout much of the commercial periphery. For Americans living in the hinterland, the possibility that Congress might enact legislation interrupting the flow of market information seemed like a step in the wrong direction. "Everything has been done," petitioners in Trumansburgh, New York, reminded Congress, to speed the transportation of the mails so that merchants living in different parts of the United States may have

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Received, RG 233. By March 1831, 240 anti-Sabbatarian petitions had found their way their Congress. The sectional breakdowns were New England (19); Mid-Atlantic (155); Northwest (35); South Atlantic (5); Southwest (11); unspecified (15).

[74] John McLean to Samuel McKean, Jan. 19, 1829, *House Report 65*, 6.

[75] William B. Rochester and other merchants of Rochester, "To the Postmaster General," Dec. 10, 1828, Petitions Received, RG 233; Lewis Jenkins, postmaster of Canandaigua, and others, to Postmaster General John McLean, Dec. 10, 1828, *ibid.*

"equal advantages" as near as "space will permit." What was needed was more expedition, not less. "In this section of the country," complained petitioners in Pulaski, Tennessee, the mails traveled so slowly that that "we should rather be induced" to petition Congress for their "more speedy conveyance" than to support any measures that would produce greater delay.[76]

Of course, not all Americans shared these sentiments. But for those merchants and other commercially minded Americans who lived far from the Atlantic seaboard, it was difficult not to regard seven-day mail delivery as one of the most cherished blessings of civilization. In 1852, the *Farmer's Monthly Visitor* summarized what had become, for many, the conventional wisdom. During the American Revolution, the *Monthly Visitor* reminded its readers, the local post office had been open only twice a week: "But now our go-ahead-ativeness is hardly satisfied with three mails a day . . . and grumbles loudly if a post office is not open for the delivery of letters on Sunday! . . . Of a surety this is an age of progress!"[77]

Possible commercial dislocations were but one of the anti-Sabbatarians concerns. No less disturbing was the Sabbatarians' insistent moralism, which seemed to be yet another example of an ominous, rapidly growing evangelical presence in public affairs. At the grass roots, there were many signs that change was in the offing. In many towns, church membership was increasing, local and state Sabbatarian laws were being enforced with renewed vigor, evangelical assaults were being launched against traditionally male pleasures such as drinking, dueling, cockfighting, and prostitution, and a few brave radicals were even speaking out in defense of the Indian and the slave.

Few commentators viewed these developments with more concern than Anne Royall, a peripetatic travel writer and one of the few female political journalists in the United States. Crisscrossing the country to assemble material for her travel books, Royall missed few chances to expose what she firmly believed to be a vast Sabbatarian conspiracy against popular liberty. Not content to denounce the Sabbatarians in print, she dumped overboard tracts deposited on steamboats for the edification of passengers and even threatened

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[76] Petition of inhabitants of Trumansburgh, New York, supporting Sunday mails, Dec. 1828, *ibid.*; petition of memorialists of Pulaski, Tennessee, supporting Sabbath mails, Feb. 1829, *ibid.*

[77] "Post Office Establishment," *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, 12 (June 1852), 183.

postmasters who sent their tracts through the mails postage-free that she would report them to Washington and have them heavily fined. Grateful for her support, mail contractors gave her free passage throughout the country. If Royall is to be believed, virtually every post office in the South had become a Sabbatarian stronghold, with Presbyterian postmasters feverishly engaged in a secret campaign to destroy the republic by persuading a gullible public to unite church and state.[78]

Equally hostile were many of the working men living in the republic's commercial cities. Though numerically quite small, these men could count on the backing of a distinguished galaxy of writers that included the maverick transcendentalist Orestes Brownson, the radical freethinker Frances Wright, the labor organizer Eli Moore, and the utopian socialist Robert Dale Owen. Despite Beecher's best efforts to enlist them in the cause—a strategy that was, on the face of it, hardly implausible since, like the nascent working man's movement, the Sabbatarians sought to limit the length of the work week—many remained unconvinced.[79]

Occasionally, this hostility took the form of direct action. Of these incidents, few prompted more discussion among contemporaries, or caused more confusion for later historians, than the trap laid for local authorities in Princeton, New Jersey, by a wily wagoner employed by the mail contracting firm of Hill, Fish & Abbe. In June 1827, the Princeton town council passed an ordinance prohibiting any stage, wagon, or cart from passing through the town on the Sabbath. Princeton was a Presbyterian stronghold, and the council seems to have been following the lead of the Presbyterian general assembly. Unwilling, however, to risk a potentially embarrassing confrontation with the federal government, the council specifically exempted vehicles carrying the public mails from the ban. Two years later, at the height of the Sabbatarian controversy, the wagoner went into action. Driving into Princeton on a Sunday with a load that included three mail bags filled with post office forms and dead letters, he

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[78] Bessie Rowland James, *Anne Royall's U.S.A.* (New Brunswick 1972), 195, 269; Anne Royall, *Mrs. Royall's Southern Tour, or Second Series of the Black Book* (3 vols., Washington 1830), I 119-120, 125, 130, 150; Royall, *Mrs. Royall's Pennsylvania, or Travels Continued in the United States* (2 vols., Washington, 1829), I, 239.

[79] Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 138-139; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York 1984), 160, 226; Lewis Tappan Journal, Dec. 10, 1828, Lewis Tappan Papers (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

paused conspicuously in plain sight of the alderman's house. A local magistrate was alerted and the wagoner was ordered to stable his horses and to remain in town until sundown. Five hours later, having all the while concealed the nature of his load, the wagoner triumphantly produced the mail bags. Outraged at his deception, the local authorities immediately allowed him to leave town. Well aware that their conduct might be misconstrued, they wrote the postmaster general to explain that they had been tricked, adding that they had no intention of knowingly blocking the passage of the public mails through their town.[80]

The damage had been done, however. In Cleveland, Ohio, for example, Harmon Kingsbury, editor of the evangelical *Western Intelligencer*, inferred that the Princeton authorities had stopped the mails to test the constitutionality of the law, only to correct himself when the full details became known. Even Hezekiah Niles, who ought to have known better, misleadingly reported in *Niles' Weekly Register* merely that the inhabitants of Princeton had stopped the mails "out of piety." Three years later, GUPCS publicists were still complaining that its work had been "grossly misrepresented" by critics who charged it with illegally attempting to stop the transportation of the mails.[81]

Anti-Sabbatarian activism sometimes took an even more virulent form. In a savage print published in 1830, Philadelphia engraver James Akin freely compared the Sabbatarians to the anti-republican, pro-Catholic "Holy Alliance" that dominated Europe after the fall of Napoleon. Freely mingling anti-Catholic and anti-Calvinistic themes, Akin portrayed the Sabbatarians as a club-wielding mob of fanatic vigilantes spurred on by a vengeful Calvinist clergy still gloating over the execution of Michael Servetus, a Spanish heretic burned to death by John Calvin in 1553. Though the immediate target of the mob's wrath was a stagecoach carrying the public mails, Akin hinted that their ultimate goals were far more ambitious. "Look after your Liberties my Boys!" exclaims one onlooker to a group of immigrant working men, "that's just the way they wanted to shackle us in Ireland!!!"[82]

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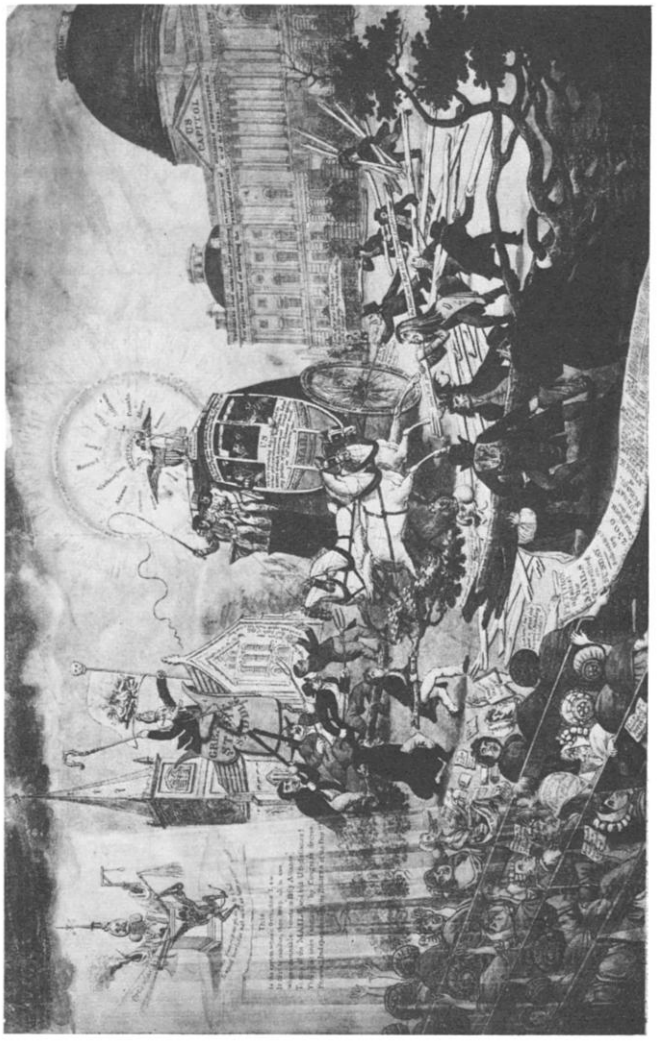
[80] "Stopping the Mail at Princeton," *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), June 23, 1829.

[81] [Cleveland] *Western Intelligencer*, May 26, July 7, 1829; "Arrest of the Mail," *Niles' Weekly Register*, May 2, 1829, 148; *Third Annual Report*, 7.

[82] On Akin, see Maureen O'Brien Quimby, "The Political Art of James Akin," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 7 (1972), 59-101.



The Specter of Majoritarian Tyranny

In this print, Philadelphia engraver James Akin compares the Sabbatarians with the reactionary "Holy Alliance" that dominated Europe after the fall of Napoleon.

Source: American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

The conspiratorial, quasi-hysterical tone of Akin's engraving serves as a pointed reminder that, to a far greater extent than has usually been realized, the anti-Sabbatarian argument drew much of its animus from what historians have come to identify as the paranoid style. In Perryville, New York, postmaster Oren S. Avery linked the protest with a supposed evangelical "plan" to drive non-evangelical presses out of business, and thereby to "coerce and subject the public mind to sectarian views." In Poughkeepsie, Judge James Emott, chairman of a meeting that its organizers described as the largest and most respectable ever held in the city, warned that the Sabbatarians were an "entering wedge" of a "grand system" that, if left unchecked, would establish an "*ecclesiastical hierarchy*" as "oppressive and dangerous" as any that existed in Papal Rome. At a second Poughkeepsie meeting the following year, another local notable flatly predicted that, should the present combination of "professedly religious individuals" succeed, it would produce "discord and disunion among the people, lead to a civil war, deluge our country in blood, and finally overthrow our republican institutions."[83]

The prevalence of such stridently anticlerical rhetoric might suggest that the anti-Sabbatarians harbored deep misgivings about organized religion. Yet recent scholarship points in a quite different direction. As Nathan Hatch has demonstrated, anticlerical rhetoric is often a hallmark of populistic Christian sects like the Disciples of Christ that, despite their strident opposition to evangelical reform, ought themselves to be regarded as evangelical as the term has today come to be understood.[84]

From this perspective, anti-Sabbatarian hostility toward evangelical reform may well have been less of a secular challenge to religious authority than an evangelical assault upon allegedly anachronistic vestiges of ecclesiastial control. Given the paucity of scholarship on the religious affiliation of the anti-Sabbatarian rank-and-file, any generalization about its social composition must

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[83] Remonstrance of the postmaster and others of Perryville, New York, Dec. 23, 1828, Petitions Received, RG 233; James Emott, chairman, "Public Meeting," unidentified clipping attached to a petition from the inhabitants of Poughkeepsie, New York [1829], *ibid.*; Thomas Sweet, chairman, "Sunday Mail Meeting," unidentified clipping attached to a petition from the inhabitants of Poughkeepsie, New York, Jan. 13, 1830, *ibid.*

[84] Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, esp. 210-226.

necessarily be tentative.[85] Yet, given what we now know about the extraordinary vitality of evangelical Protestantism in this period, especially in the hinterland, one suspects that for every urban artisan whose anti-Sabbatarianism derived from secular premises, there may well have been ten rural farmers who took their cues from anti-Sabbatarian evangelicals like Alexander Campbell, the cofounder, with his father Thomas, of the Disciples of Christ. Indeed, to a far greater extent than most historians have acknowledged, the Sabbatarianism controversy may well have been less of a struggle pitting liberals against conservatives, evangelicals against anti-evangelicals, or promoters against opponents of social control, than a debate among evangelicals over the proper relationship of church and state.

Though Sabbatarian publicists were wont to hail the protest as "spontaneous," perceptive observers knew better. The petition effort may have had an impressive base of grass-roots support, yet it was hardly unplanned. For Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, this was precisely what made it so disturbing. Though Channing had twice lent the considerable prestige of his name to the Sabbatarians' cause, he remained profoundly suspicious of evangelical reform, and was especially disturbed by GUPCS, warning that such a "vast association" could easily be "perverted" to political purposes. Highly sensitive to the myriad ways in which the postal system and the press were transforming American political culture, Channing feared especially the facilities they provided organizations like GUPCS to send forth a "concerted and joint cry." In the United States, Channing warned, few things were more to be dreaded than organizations by which "public opinion may be brought to bear tyrannically against individuals or sects." As a consequence, he recommended that, as a matter of principle, "all associations aiming or tending to establish sway by numbers ought to be opposed" regardless of the position they happened to take. Such organizations, he added—reflecting, perhaps, on personal experience—could easily "overpower" the "most conscientious men of the community."[86]

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[85] For quantitative analyses of the religious affiliation of selected anti-Sabbatarian petitioners, see Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 185, and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 165.

[86] Bruen, *First Annual Report*, 13; William E. Channing, "Remarks on Associations," *Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (6 vols., Boston 1849), I, 326, 306-307.

Channing's warning highlights what was perhaps the Sabbatarians' most characteristic achievement. Taking full advantage of the postal system and the evangelical press, the first "mass media" in the United States, they successfully cut across sectional and religious lines to unite thousands of Americans in a common cause. Above all, they increased public awareness of the federal government's role in their daily lives and of the need to question its authority. In 1815, the *Panoplist* had felt obliged to consider whether a petition effort might be "disrespectful" to Congress. By 1828, few Sabbatarians felt so constrained. As the Maine association of Congregational churches proclaimed, "We will let Congress know that our rulers *shall obey us; that WE are their MASTERS!!*"[87] Like the religious revivals that culminated during the 1820s, the Sabbatarian protest represented an important chapter in the democratization of American culture.

The Sabbatarians' ability to mobilize popular support decisively colored their official reception in Washington. For Postmaster General McLean, the Sabbatarians' challenge was not merely administrative but political. A devout Methodist, McLean may well have been the first prominent public figure to seriously contemplate a run for the presidency on the basis of his appeal among evangelicals. Given his reputation, McLean was anxious not to alienate potential supporters on either side of the issue. Having actively solicited the advice of merchants living in upstate New York, McLean was well aware of its remarkable capacity to polarize the electorate. Thus, while he might assure Evarts in private that he was "friendly" to any "practicable reform," in public he found it prudent to stress how the uninterrupted transmission of "speedy intelligence" had become of "great importance" to the republic's commercial elite.[88]

A similar ambivalence characterized the public posture of Samuel McKean, chairman of the House Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads and a candidate for governor of Pennsylvania. In a report widely praised by the Sabbatarians, McKean drew attention to their impressive base of popular support. Never in the history of the republic, McKean declared, had the American people made a

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[87] "On Carrying the Mail," 440; "The Mails," *Niles' Weekly Register*, Oct. 24, 1829, 134; David Paul Nord, "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835," *Journalism Monographs*, 88 (May 1984), 1-30.

[88] Jeremiah Evarts to David Greene, Mar. 5, 1829, Feb. 15, 1829, ABCFM Records; John McLean to Samuel McKean, Jan. 19, 1829, *House Report 65*, 6.

"stronger expression" of their views on a public issue, if one took into account either the "numbers, the wealth, or the intelligence of the petitioners." In a private conversation with Evarts, McKean went still further, flatly predicting that, should the Sabbatarians' keep up their pressure on Congress, they would assuredly prevail. Eager to right past wrongs—and, one suspects, mindful of the possible impact of the issue on the Pennsylvania gubernatorial election—McKean threw his support, and that of the House committee, behind the repeal of the 1810 law. Repeal, McKean insisted, would prevent the "absurdity" of requiring postmasters to perform tasks they "conscientiously" believed to be "morally wrong."[89]

Yet this was as far as McKean would go. Though McKean confided to Evarts that he did not himself believe the Sabbath mails to be a commercial necessity, he was quick to add that this was a minority view not only among members of the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads but in the House. The uninterrupted transportation of the mails was, he affirmed in his report, an "object of primary importance." Should its suspension coincide with a sudden rise in the price of agricultural commodities in the principal European markets, men of "enterprise and capital" would send out private expresses, making possible "speculations" to an "unlimited amount." Taking advantage of this inside information, speculators could then deprive "honest" owners of property living on the commercial periphery of their "means of information." "Here," moralized McKean, is a "great evil."[90]

Far more hostile was Senator Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, the powerful chairman of the Senate Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads. While McLean and McKean had adopted a respectful stance toward the Sabbatarians, Johnson took the offensive. A vigorous proponent of the economic development of the Southwest, Johnson quite naturally feared the impact of the proposed suspension

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[89] Samuel McKean, "Report," *House Report 65*, 1, 4; Evarts to Greene, Feb. 15, 1829, ABCFM Records.

[90] Evarts to Greene, Feb. 15, 1829, ABCFM Records; Samuel McKean, "Report," *House Report 65*, 3. McKean insisted that the Sabbatarians' proposal would be detrimental to the moral as well as the commercial well-being of the republic. The "first duty of the Government," McKean proclaimed, was to "protect the citizens in their property." "Under no circumstances," he added, was this protection more necessary than in the case of the property holder living on the commercial periphery. Thus, the Sabbatarians' proposal would "probably produce a greater amount of moral evil than the present system."

on the commercial periphery. And as a close friend of anti-Sabbatarian evangelical Alexander Campbell, and the brother of Campbellite preacher John Telemachus Johnson, he recognized anti-Sabbatarianism to be a potent political weapon in its own right.

To drive his point home, Johnson issued two landmark reports. Never before, Johnson insisted in his first report, had any considerable body of citizens presumed Congress to be a "proper tribunal" to determine the "laws of God." Even though the "great majority" of Americans agreed that the "first day"—that is, Sunday—ought to be set apart from the "ordinary vocations of life," a small minority did not. Jews and Christian sects like the Disciples of Christ continued to hold out for the "seventh day"—that is, Saturday. Should Congress bow to Sabbatarian pressure, it would be guilty of attempting to resolve a religious controversy through legislative means. Because such a power had been "wisely withheld" from the federal government—a mere "civil institution, wholly destitute of religious authority"—Johnson concluded that the issue ought properly to be decided "simply as a question of expediency."[91] In 1817, Elijah Hunt Mills had angrily rejected all considerations of expediency as a legitimate basis for resolving the controversy. In 1829, Richard M. Johnson came close to inverting Mills's basic premise. Given the controversial character of the issue, expediency now became the only plausible grounds upon which it might be resolved.

No less disturbing for Johnson was the Sabbatarians' success at mobilizing public opinion. Like all "religious combinations" intent on securing political objectives, the GUPCS was intrinsically dangerous. "All religious despotism," Johnson insisted, began in the same way. Once the Sabbatarians' influence began to be felt in national politics, the civil power would soon fall under their sway, with the "catastrophe of other nations" furnishing "an awful warning of the consequence." Mincing no words, Johnson went so far in his second report as to compare them with Benedict Arnold, traitor to the republic, and Judas Iscariot, traitor to Christ.[92]

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[91] Richard M. Johnson, "Report . . . on the subject of mails on the Sabbath," Jan. 19, 1829, 20th Cong., 2nd sess., *Senate Document 46*, 1-4. Though the Disciples of Christ held their church services on the Sunday, they regarded Saturday as the Sabbath. Walter Wilson Jennings, *Origin and Early History of the Disciples of Christ* (Cincinnati 1919), 247-249.

[92] Johnson, "Report," *Senate Document 46*, 2; Richard M. Johnson, "Sunday Mail," Mar. 4, 1830, 21st Cong., 1st sess., *House Report 271*, 3. The anti-

Though it was widely recognized, even by Johnson's friends, that Johnson lacked the education to produce such learned expositions of theology and law, the authorship of his reports was long one of Washington's best-kept secrets. Only many years later would it become generally known that both had been ghostwritten by Johnson's landlord, close friend, and fellow Baptist, Obadiah Brown.[93] A genial, jovial man who was "scarcely ever serious except at prayers and in the pulpit," Brown was an excellent choice for the job. During the week Brown was a clerk in the general post office, while on Sunday he doubled as minister of Washington's First Baptist Church. As a clerk, Brown well understood the likely impact of the proposed suspension on the commercial periphery. It would, as he bluntly stated in Johnson's first report, sink the postal system into a "state of pusillanimity incompatible with the government of which it is a department." In addition, as a Baptist minister, he was well versed in the Baptists' traditional assaults upon clerical tyranny. In fact, the reports included so many stock anticlerical arguments that contemporaries quite plausibly attributed them to both Alexander Campbell and John Leland, a Baptist itinerant celebrated for his defense of the absolute separation of church and state.[94]

Johnson's reports were obviously intended less for his Senate peers than for the general public. To help insure that they reached the widest possible audience, he had Congress print them up in unusually large editions, which, of course, thanks to Congress's postal privileges, could then be sent off to constituents for free. Printer-entrepreneurs quite literally capitalized on their vituperative tone, preparing cheap pamphlet editions in a flamboyant typography that mimicked the dramatic nuances of the stump speaker. Even their title

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majoritarian animus of Johnson's report sparked outrage among Sabbatarians. Huffed one Presbyterian minister from Virginia: "Mr. Johnson and his committee seem alarmed at the simultaneous exertions of citizens of every rank and denomination of Christian in our country—as if [a] union of multitudes must make a cause bad." "Sunday Mails," *Niles' Weekly Register*, Feb. 28, 1829, 5.

[93] William Stickney, ed., *Autobiography of Amos Kendall* (Boston 1872), 307; Richardson, *Alexander Campbell*, II, 334-335n; Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 139n.

[94] Stickney, ed., *Amos Kendall*, 287-288; Johnson, "Report," *Senate Document 46*, 3; Lyman H. Butterfield, "Elder John Leland, Jeffersonian Itinerant," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 62 (Oct. 1952), 239; Richardson, *Campbell*, I, 536-537, II, 334-335n; John Leland, "Transportation of the Mail," *The Writings of the Elder John Leland . . .* , ed. L.F. Greene (New York 1845), 564-566; *Christian Baptist*, 6 (1829), 535-538. Brown's position was, however, hardly typical of the Baptist rank and file. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, II, 1112, 1267.

was chosen for polemical effect, editors invariably substituting the secular "Sunday" for the religious "Sabbath." Eventually, both inspired popular engravings reviling the Sabbatarians' cause; special versions of Johnson's reports were even printed on satin to be hung in front parlors as a "new Declaration of Independence" and a "supplement to our Bill of Rights."[95]

Though the flattering reception accorded Johnson's reports has often been cited as proof of the Sabbatarians' limited popular appeal, a plausible case can be made for precisely the opposite. Had the protest *not* elicited a broad measure of grass-roots support, it seems unlikely that it would have aroused so much concern. Hezekiah Niles, editor of the highly regarded *Niles' Register*, recommended the first report to his readers precisely because he feared the "simultaneous movement" of so many people in such different parts of the country. One Baltimore editor went so far as to speculate that in some congressional districts Sabbatarianism might prove to be a critical issue in upcoming elections. The Sabbatarians, the editor complained, had brought forth such a "deluge" of "religious clamor" that the issue might be made a "stalking horse to popularity." There are "thousands" of Americans, he added, whose knowledge of the Constitution was far inferior to their "assumed acquaintance" with the "law of God." Convinced that the Sabbatarians' position was unconstitutional, he worried nonetheless that, should Congress sustain their cause, the "*few* may tremble for their safety."[96]

From the perspective of American political culture, Johnson's reports signal the emergence of a new relationship between the Senate and the American public. In the 1780s, the framers of the federal Constitution had presumed that the Senate would be insulated from the ordinary citizen by the indirect mode of its election. It was to be the linchpin of federalism, linking the state legislatures to the federal government. By the late 1820s, however, it had become technically feasible—and, as Johnson demonstrated, highly effective—for a senator to appeal directly to the grass roots. His reports may have

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[95] *Register of Debates in Congress*, 20 Cong., 2nd sess., 42; [Richard M. Johnson], *Report of a Committee of the Senate . . .* (Philadelphia 1829); [Richard M. Johnson], *Report of the Committee on the Senate . . .* (Baltimore 1829); *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 87; Richardson, *Campbell*, I, 536; "Mr. Johnson's Report," broadside on silk [n.d.] (American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.)

[96] "Sunday Mails," *Niles' Weekly Register*, Feb. 7, 1829, 385; [Johnson], *Report of a Committee on the Senate . . .* (Baltimore 1829), 3-4, 5, 6.

The Anti-Sabbatarians Take the Offensive

Clearly inspired by Richard M. Johnson's first report on the Sabbath mails, this venomous anti-Sabbatarian engraving caricatures the Sabbatarians as a vicious mob of God-crazed vigilantes assailing a United States mail coach bearing "Important Despatches."

Source: Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts

incorporated many of the elements of popular oratory, yet they had clearly been designed less for a face-to-face audience than a distant readership. The art of sending a message to Congress may have pioneered by GUPCS, but it was Johnson and his editorial allies who devised the means for defusing the threat.

If the Sabbatarians are to be judged solely in terms of the passage of specific legislation, then there can be little question that, at least in the short term, they failed to carry the day. In 1830, as in 1817, the mails continued to run on the Sabbath and the post offices remained open. Their influence on postal policy, however, was far more far-reaching than is usually supposed. In the short term, they persuaded Postmaster General McLean to close a number of post offices on the Sabbath, and, in certain instances, even to suspend Sabbath delivery.[97]

Even more impressive were the changes set in motion with the coming of the railroad. Because trains were far more expensive to run than stagecoaches, while most passengers, if given the choice, preferred not to travel on the Sabbath, a succession of postmasters general came to discover that it was often far cheaper to contract for service on six days per week rather than seven. Beginning in 1841, for example, Postmaster General Charles Wickliffe curtailed Sabbath service on some 80,000 miles of routes, a fact that was hardly lost on the American and Foreign Sabbath Union, which gleefully included the statistic in its 1845 annual report.[98]

With the advent of commercial telegraphy in 1844, pressures to cut back on Sabbath service intensified. Now that the telegraph, rather than the postal system, provided merchants with up-to-date market information, seven-day service lost its most compelling peacetime rationale. Taking advantage of this change, in 1847, Postmaster General Cave Johnson suspended all Sunday mail trains on the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, while, in 1850, Postmaster General Nathan Hall did the same on the Pennsylvania. In 1866, a convention of railroad managers came to a similar conclusion, urging the postmaster general to eliminate all unnecessary Sunday mail trains so that their employees could keep the day "in

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[97] *Third Annual Report of the General Union*, 24.

[98] Davis, *Half Century*, 186; S.R. Hobbie to Charles Wickliffe, Nov. 24, 1842, in "Report of the Postmaster General," 27th Cong., 3rd sess., *House Report 1*, 730; *Second Annual Report of the American and Foreign Sabbath Union* (Boston 1845), 21-22.

accordance with the moral sentiment of the community." Now that the Civil War had ended, they reasoned, considerations of national security no longer required that the service be maintained. As service was curtailed, so post offices were closed. Finally, in 1912, an alliance of ministers and postal clerks convinced Congress to close down all of those offices still open on the Sabbath for good.[99]

It may seem downright perverse to suggest that a protest so seemingly anachronistic as Sabbatarianism could have been anything but a hopeless failure. Yet once it is understood that the Sabbatarians' overriding goal was to influence not Congress but public opinion, it becomes worth considering whether the protest ought not, like temperance, to be judged a resounding success. Had no organized movement to promote the better observance of the Sabbath been undertaken, can it be supposed that the institution would have retained the vitality it did right up until the Civil War, if not beyond? Looking back on the previous half-century from the vantage point of 1850, Emerson Davis, a Congregationist minister in Westfield, Massachusetts, saw little reason to doubt that a great victory had been won.[100] Even more tellingly, fervent anti-Sabbatarians like George Logan Fisher, a Quaker merchant from Philadelphia, reached an identical conclusion.[101] Rather than smugly announcing the demise of the Sabbath, historians might more profitably ponder just why it persisted for as long as it did. Organized Sabbatarianism may not be the whole story, but it would certainly be a plausible place to begin.

Once Sabbatarianism is understood to be part of a continuing cultural tradition that, while it may not have survived to the present day, was hardly dead in 1860, it becomes far easier to understand just why the issue proved so contentious. Like most controversies rooted in fundamental matters of religious belief, virtually *everyone* took the issue seriously. Today, obviously, the passions have cooled, making it difficult to understand just what all the fuss was about. At one level,

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[99] William Logan Fisher, *The History of the Institution of the Sabbath Day, Its Uses and Abuses* (Philadelphia 1847), 147-148; *Prohibition of Sunday Travelling on the Pennsylvania Rail Road* (Philadelphia 1850), 3; *Proceedings of the National Railway Convention, at the Music Fund Hall, Philadelphia, Pa., July 4th and 5th, 1866* (Philadelphia 1866), 13; *The Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, XXXVII, 543; O. Henry White typescript (U.S. Postal Service Library, Washington). An exception was made, however, for special delivery.

[100] Davis, *Half Century*, 183-188.

[101] Fisher, *History of the Institution of the Sabbath Day*, 147-148.

the controversy involved divergent understandings of the proper relationship of church and state. Put somewhat more abstractly, it involved nothing less than two of the central pillars of the Victorian social order in an epochal struggle over the competing claims of space and time. The postal system linked Americans through space; the Sabbath bound them over time. In response to Beecher's eloquent plea for time, Johnson championed space and, by implication, the triumph of a fully commercialized, national economy. Given the alternatives, it is hardly surprising that so many sided with Beecher, or that, in so doing, they found themselves embarked on what may well have been America's first great antimodern crusade.[102]

The consequences of Sabbatarianism extended far beyond the proper observance of the Sabbath. As Wyatt-Brown observed almost twenty years ago, Sabbatarians-turned-abolitionists like Lewis Tappan would soon adapt the Sabbatarians' innovative use of the petition process in their crusade against slavery. The two movements, however, shared far more than personnel and technique. Wyatt-Brown has termed it "ironic" and a "curious fact" that so many Sabbatarians subsequently became vigorous critics of slavery and race prejudice, adding that it was only during this later phase of their careers that they came to recognize that a truly Christian society had to rest on morally defensible foundations. Yet this was precisely the premise that had informed the Sabbatarian movement ever since the Pittsburgh synod sent its first petition to Congress in 1810. The notion that Christianity ought to enjoy a privileged status in public affairs was, as the late Stephen Botein has provocatively suggested, among the "unwritten fundamentals" of American political culture.[103] With the Sabbatarian controversy, this notion came under intensive public scrutiny for the first time. In the process, the Sabbatarians affirmed, and Richard M. Johnson rejected, the momentous proposition that, now that the federal government had invaded civil society, it ought to embrace not merely the rights of property but the rights of man.

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[102] On the mingling of modern and antimodern (or "countermodern") impulses, see Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York 1981), esp. 4-7; and Peter L. Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions about Prosperity, Equality, and Liberty* (New York 1986), 198-201.

[103] Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism," 339-340; Botein, "Religious Dimensions of the Early American State," 330.

Equally noteworthy was the impact of Sabbatarianism on the emerging mass parties. That the two might be related was, at least initially, by no means clear. As late as May 1829, Lyman Beecher found it highly disturbing that the issue could ever become subject to the "collisions incident to popular elections." Indeed, of the hundreds of petitions sent to Congress between December 1828 and May 1830, not one so much as mentioned the signers' party affiliation or even alluded to the recent election of Andrew Jackson. One might suppose that most Sabbatarians would have opposed Jackson's election and backed John Quincy Adams, given Adams's New England background and his well-deserved reputation for moral rectitude. Yet Adams was a Unitarian, which made him decidedly suspect in the eyes of many evangelicals, while Jackson was a Presbyterian and regular churchgoer who, despite his turbulent past, was widely assumed to be a deeply religious man. Shortly after Jackson's inauguration, Evarts solemnly predicted that the new president stood a better chance of going to heaven than any of his predecessors since George Washington. To complicate matters still further, Jackson's supporters included several prominent Sabbatarians, including Tennessee senator Felix Grundy, a fact not lost on Evarts, who attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade Grundy to speak out in Congress on behalf of the cause.[104]

By the mid-1830s, however, it had become clear to most Sabbatarians that, if forced to choose, they would cast their lot with the Whigs. The Sabbatarians' insistent moralism, combined with their seeming indifference to the commercial periphery, squared nicely with the characteristic Whig preference for improvement in existing institutions as opposed to expansion through space.[105] Even more importantly, both shared a common antagonist in Jacksonian Democrat Richard M. Johnson, whom the Sabbatarians came to regard, following the publication of his two reports, with almost

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[104] [Lyman Beecher], "Mr. Johnson's Report on Sabbath Mails," *Spirit of the Pilgrims,* 2 (Mar. 1829), 142; Jeremiah Evarts to David Greene, Apr. 10, 1830, Mar. 5, 1829, ABCFM Records; [Evarts], *Memorial*, 23.

[105] In this context, it is worth noting that Evarts and Frelinghuysen combined support for Sabbatarianism with opposition to the removal of the Cherokee and the other "civilized" tribes to the west of the Mississippi. For a lucid discussion of Whig ideology, see Major L. Wilson, *Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict, 1815-1861* (Westport 1974), and Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago 1979).

unbounded contempt. Among Presbyterians, these memories would linger even into the twentieth century.[106]

The relationship between the Sabbatarians and the Whigs was more than symbolic. Under the leadership of Harmon Kingsbury, the "Sunday mails" lobby would become a small yet formidable element in the Whig coalition. In 1840 it helped elect William Henry Harrison president. From the Sabbatarians' perspective, the decision of Whig Postmaster General Charles Wickliffe to discontinue the Sabbath mails on thousands of post routes was a vindication of party principle. Joseph C. Hornblower, the chief justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, was so gratified that he wrote Wickliffe personally to thank him for his "deep interest" in the cause.[107] Equally notable was the selection of Theodore Frelinghuysen—the leading Sabbatarian in the Senate and an ex-president of GUPCS—to be Henry Clay's running mate in the veteran Whig's final, ill-fated bid for the presidency in 1844.

Just as the Sabbatarians gravitated toward the Whigs, so the anti-Sabbatarians tended to align themselves with the Democrats. The anti-Sabbatarians' characteristic sensitivity toward the commercial periphery, combined with their inveterate suspicion of evangelical tyranny, complemented—and, indeed, helped to clarify—the pro-expansionist, anti-moralistic outlook of the antebellum Democratic party. For Richard M. Johnson, the publicity surrounding his two reports proved a major boon to his political career. Before 1829, Johnson was probably best known to the general public as the Indian fighter who, during the War of 1812, had supposedly killed the Indian warrior Tecumseh. With the publication of his two reports, he emerged, at least in the pro-Jackson press, as a statesman of national

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[106] Jacob Harris Patton, *A Popular History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (New York 1903), 350-351. Presbyterian jurist Thomas H. Baird found it especially outrageous that Johnson should term the Sabbatarians a "dangerous combination." "Never," he exploded, "has the right of the people to 'petition for redress of grievances,' been so set at naught, never have their wishes been so slighted—their feelings so mocked—and their delegated authority so perverted." Harmon Kingsbury also assailed Johnson's reports in hyperbolic terms "Satan never accomplished a greater temporary victory over this institution, through any agency, in any country, unless the infidelity of France be an exception . . . ." Baird, *An Essay on the Subject of the Transportation of the Mail on the Sabbath* (Pittsburgh [1829]), 3; Kingsbury, *Sabbath*, 35.

[107] Joseph C. Hornblower to Charles Wickliffe, Oct. 25, 1843, Letters Received, RG 28; Richard Carwardine, "Evangelicals, Whigs and the Election of William Henry Harrison," *Journal of American Studies*, 17 (Apr. 1983), 57.

stature—a transmogrification that would culminate, in 1836, with his election by the House of Representatives as vice president of the United States.[108]

The relationship between the Sabbatarian controversy and mass parties extended far beyond its role in shaping party ideology or boosting party candidates. Even more fundamentally, it demonstrated how the communications revolution being wrought by the postal system and the press could be used to mobilize ordinary Americans as a political force. This lesson was not lost on political strategists eager to capitalize on techniques pioneered by the evangelicals. It is a commonplace of American political history that, sometime between the election of Andrew Jackson and the Whigs' "Log Cabin" campaign of 1840, the electoral process came to acquire many of the characteristic trappings of a religious revival. This process, historians now agree, was set in motion by the sudden injection into national politics, during the mid-1820s, of highly charged issues that, like antimasonry, were largely religious in character.

Conflicts rooted in religious belief have, of course, always loomed large in American electoral politics. Yet they seem to have become increasingly salient when, following Andrew Jackson's election, the advent of organized competition between the Democrats and Whigs transformed the gentry-based political order of the Founding Fathers into the mass-based political order that has endured to the present day. The Sabbatarian controversy provided political strategists with an object lesson in how to harness for party purposes the religious passions aroused by the Second Great Awakening. Few issues were better suited for mobilizing a mass electorate into mutually antagonistic camps. It was, in short, a prelude not merely to abolitionism, but to the party period. What had begun as an alternative to mass politics had become—despite, or perhaps more precisely, because of the Sabbatarians' very success at mobilizing public opinion—a major catalyst for the creation of the world's first mass parties.

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[108] Ben: Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia 1886), 101.